

DAY 1 - Friday, August 28



Still from *Stalker* (1979), credit: Andrei Tarkovsky

9.00-9.30 Workshop opening

Christine Bichsel & Lorenzo Andolfatto, University of Fribourg

9.30-12.00 Session 1

Ben Garlick & Liesl King, York St John University

Thinking beyond the Anthropocene: Excavating Potential Futures/Future Potentials in Ursula Le Guin's Always Coming Home

Nicoletta Pesaro, Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Social Space and Dystopian Geography in Hao Jingfang's Novel Wandering Maerth

Anke Schwarz & Frank Müller, Technical University Dresden

Future Spaces: Geo Fiction, Science Fiction, Utopia

Discussant: Lorenzo Andolfatto

Earth and its Others: the Geographies of Science Fiction

Venue: Department of Geosciences, University of Fribourg / MS Teams meeting room

Organisers: Christine Bichsel (christine.bichsel@unifr.ch) and Lorenzo Andolfatto (lorenzo.andolfatto@unifr.ch)

DAY 1 - Friday, August 28

13.30-16.00 Session 2

Gwennael Gaffric, University of Jean Moulin Lyon III
Zheng He's Travels and Alternative Geographies of Earth in Liu Cixin's Science Fiction

Mark Rhodes, Michigan Technological University
Lost Utopia: Star Trek's Socio-spatial Reflections

Discussant: Christine Bichsel



Still from *Stalker* (1979), credit: Andrei Tarkovsky / Source: Strelkamag.com

Earth and its Others: the Geographies of Science Fiction

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DAY 2 - Saturday, August 29

9.30-12.00 Session 3

Amy Butt, University of Reading

"It was quiet": The Radical Architectures of Understatement in Feminist SF

Ben A. Platt, University of Cambridge

Biopunk(ed) Urban Ecologies: Miéville's (2000) Perdido Street Station as a Counterposition to Contemporary Ecological Design

Loic Aloisio, Aix-Marseilles University, France

Heterotopias in Han Song's Science Fiction

Discussant: Lorenzo Andolfatto



Still from *Stalker* (1979), credit: Andrei Tarkovsky / Source: Criterion.com

14.00-16.00 CLOSING REMARKS / PLENARY SESSION

Chaired by Lorenzo Andolfatto & Christine Bichsel

Earth and its Others: the Geographies of Science Fiction

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Due to the current circumstances,
the workshop will take place online only.

To request a MS Teams link and join the event,
send us a message at
christine.bichsel@unifr.ch or lorenzo.andolfatto@unifr.ch

Earth and its Others: the Geographies of Science Fiction

THINKING BEYOND THE ANTHROPOCENE: EXCAVATING POTENTIAL FUTURES/FUTURE POTENTIALS IN URSULA LE GUIN'S *ALWAYS COMING HOME*

Ben Garlick / Liesl King, York St John University UK

ABSTRACT

The science fiction of Ursula Le Guin has long been celebrated by geographers and scholars within the wider post humanities alike. She deftly uses prose to conjure alternative worlds, societies and cultures of nature that make 'thinkable' and tangible more abstract questions of ethics, violence and interrelating amidst times of profound upheaval. Equally, her writing is suffused with a sense of the quietly hopeful – that we are already in possession of the tools we require to craft better futures. What is required is to pay better attention to the here and now, as much as that which may yet be. Across her work, Le Guin poses political and ethical questions about the value of, and our relationship to, the wider environment, and the consequences that (may) lie in wait further along our contemporary lines of flight. In *Always Coming Home*, first published in the UK in 1986, she attempts to excavate a possible cultural geography of the future of life on earth. In this paper, we attend to the space-times of this experimental 'archaeology of the future'. We explore the means by which her non-linear, digressive and fragmentary style serves to hold in tension both the sense of there being multiple possible articulations of what comes after the 'Anthropocene' (as we might now call it), amidst a profound uncertainty around the effects of our *current* modes of existence, how these are to be conceptualised, and onto what potential futures they might open.

SOCIAL SPACE AND DYSTOPIAN GEOGRAPHY IN HAO JINGFANG'S NOVEL *WANDERING MAERTH*

Nicoletta Pesaro, Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy

ABSTRACT

In her works, Hao Jingfang often indulges in representing possible and impossible cityscapes and planetscapes in order to deploy her imagery of contemporary/future society. Through the profusion of spatial details Hao provides a new geography, where people, places, buildings and means of transport interact, implying social clashes, disparities, and a continuous borders' trespassing. Belonging to the post-Reform generation that has grown up within China's astonishing urbanisation process, Hao embodies Chinese people's anxiety in terms of dramatically changing living spaces, and the increasingly problematic human prospect. The preoccupation with shared space and social coexistence is also explored in Hao's first novel *Liulan Ma'esi* (Wandering Maerth, 2012), featuring a group of young students who return to their birth planet, Mars, after spending five years on Earth. The coming-of-age story focuses on one of the students, Luoying, caught in between the two rival planets: Earth, where desires are unrestrained, commercialization runs wild, and technology dominates the life of individuals, and its utopian Other, Mars, where life is collective-oriented and boringly pre-ordained and education and careers are based on well-established, unbreakable models. Hao's fiction clearly confirms that "space is not a neutral backdrop for human action but is charged with meaning through discourse and practice" (Kneale, Kitchin 2005, 2), and science fiction in itself is a form of geography, where borders are continuously trespassed or blurred, such as between science and fiction, human and non-human, utopian and dystopian. In my paper I will analyse how Hao Jingfang, inserting herself into a long tradition, adopts Mars as a mirror of Earth, in order to explore different social models through a philosophical and cultural reflection on Chinese society and its relationship with the world.

FUTURE SPACES: GEO FICTION, SCIENCE FICTION, UTOPIA

Anke Schwarz / Frank Müller, Technical University Dresden

ABSTRACT

Anarres, the anarchist planet featuring in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, architectural drawings for Charles Fourier's utopian Phalanstère, and the OpenGeoFiction platform all map out fictional future geographies of power and resistance, built materialities and imagination, societal status quo and radical transformation. When they attempt to project an entirely fictional universe of towns, cities and territorial states they also question the normative, affective, technological and epistemological orders that shape our present. In this paper, we depart from a chronological conception of time in order to examine alternative future spaces beyond a modernist paradigm. Drawing from expressions of future space narratives, we ask how these reproduce or radically transform known spatial orders. In our understanding, the narrative creation of geographical futures leaves behind prediction as an act of reproducing regular patterns of probable futures on the basis of a "sticky past" (Ahmed, 2004: 33). In contrast, we read these works as examples of the situated practice of speculation (Savransky et al., 2017). As we trace this speculative practice in Science Fiction, utopian literatures, and an online geo-platform, we develop a four-dimensional analytical matrix of future spaces that outlines their normative, affective, practical, and epistemological dimensions. Anderson's conceptualization of anticipatory practices (2010: 787) provides a point of departure here. On this basis, we then discuss how each work addresses authority and the spatial ordering of bodies, and what we can learn from their analysis for a better understanding of today's spatial contestations.

ZHENG HE'S TRAVELS AND ALTERNATIVE GEOGRAPHIES OF EARTH IN LIU CIXIN'S SCIENCE FICTION

Gwennaël Gaffric, University of Jean Moulin Lyon III

ABSTRACT

In this intervention, I will explore the appropriation in science fiction of the historical figure of Zheng He, a famous Chinese navigator of the Ming era. I will first question the way in which Zheng He is today the subject of many fantasies and political recoveries and the way in which the historical truth about his travels in the 15th century is often biased by ideological significance, especially at the time of the New Silk Roads. I will then propose a reading of the “alternate history” short story “The Western Ocean”, written in 1998 by Chinese science fiction writer Liu Cixin. In this story, the author imagines an alternative future where Zheng He’s travels have contributed to the hegemony of an imaginary China. I will examine how this alternative history also offers the opportunity to rethink contemporary geopolitics, at a time when China is regularly presented as a “conquering power”.

LOST UTOPIA: *STAR TREK*'S SOCIO-SPATIAL REFLECTIONS

Mark Rhodes, Michigan Technological University

ABSTRACT

While all science fiction reflects broader social and spatial relations, Star Trek has often been a beacon of utopian future amongst the contemporary science fiction blockbusters which are vastly bleak and dystopian. Geographies of Star Trek, as well as science fiction more broadly, have explored these human-non-human relationships, geopolitics, and considerations of imaginary landscapes, often investigating Star Trek's power for contemporary and futuristic utopia. The use of dystopia in Star Trek, however, is particularly underexplored. Dystopia, across cultural geographies, reveals alternative, imagined, and often quite rooted cases of socio-spatial relations. With clear parallels to similar work in political and social geography, this paper does not examine the novel crises as they regularly appear in Star Trek but rather focuses on the continued institutionalized and bureaucratic challenges faced in a world which has largely removed scarcity from the equation of material relations. Employing discourse analysis across the canonical Star Trek universe, I ask how ongoing socio-spatial relations of protest, mobility, and place translate in a supposedly utopian imagined world. Star Trek: Picard in particular, as the newest Star Trek series and first to explore further into the timeline since 2002, raises these questions, specifically in the face of a refugee crisis and affixing of a supposedly violent Other. This paper connects the geographies of the utopian and dystopian with the literary landscapes of socio-spatial relations.

“IT WAS QUIET”: THE RADICAL ARCHITECTURES OF UNDERSTATEMENT IN FEMINIST SF

Amy Butt, University of Reading

ABSTRACT

“Abbenay was poisonless: a bare city, bright, the colours light and hard, the air pure. It was quiet. You could see it all, laid out as plain as spilt salt.” Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (1974)

The architectural restraint of *The Dispossessed* is jarringly at odds with predominant portrayals of the science fiction city synonymous with rapid vertical urbanisation. As noted by Graham (2016) the vertical has become almost ubiquitous, closing off alternative urban visions and crowding out the possible futures they contain. While there is a growing call for the study of sf by scholars in the spatial disciplines such as Abbott (2016), Collie (2011), and Hewitt and Graham (2015), the unassuming, everyday spaces of feminist sf are often lost in the shadows cast by the dystopian high-rise. This paper is an attempt to step outside what Kitchin and Kneale (2002) refer to as the “approved canon” to consider works of feminist sf which explore alternate built futures and their socio-economic structures. It will consider novels such as Sally Miller Gearhart’s *The Wanderground* (1979) and Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), alongside contemporary works such as N. K. Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season* (2015) and Cory Doctorow’s *Walkaway* (2017). By imaginatively inhabiting the utopian enclaves within these feminist texts it is possible to explore geographies of alterity. Following bell hooks (1990) they offer us visions of an as yet unrealized ‘homeplace’, both sanctuary and radical point of departure from which we can imagine the future otherwise.

BIOPUNK(ED) URBAN ECOLOGIES : MIÉVILLE'S (2000) PERDIDO STREET STATION AS A COUNTERPOSITION TO CONTEMPORARY ECOLOGICAL DESIGN

Ben A. Platt, University of Cambridge

ABSTRACT

Under the putative emergence of the Anthropocene urbanization is articulated as a decentralized and self-organizing technological process of planetary scale. Designers increasingly engage posthumanist iterations of neo-organicism and biomorphogenic urbanism in order to foreground an 'intelligent' or responsive urban system. Claudia Pasquero and Marco Poletto's *EcoLogicStudios* (London) is such an iteration; their designs implicate the autonomous relation between 'slime' [*Physarum polycephalum*], responsive substrate and satellite information, in order to elucidate self-organizing, emerging and nonhuman urban spatialities. This paper presents a reading of China Miéville's (2000) *Perdido Street Station* as an emancipatory counterposition to Pasquero and Poletto's (2019) work. Placing both into conversation, it argues that Miéville's fabulation of the city of 'New Crobuzon' maintains a subversive form of urban 'intelligence' capable of evading biopolitical capture. Whereas Pasquero and Poletto's (2019) designs instrumentalize human-nonhuman emergence towards a form of 'environmentality' – drawing excessive relations into predictable organizational configurations – Miéville's biopunk city maintains a fragmented incommensurability that always exceeds calculation and organization. In this way, Miéville presents a 'weird' heterotropic space. One imbued with non-instrumentalized urban 'intelligence' that that subverts panoptical force whilst remaining reflexive and responsive to its posthuman inhabitants. A biopunked 'smart city'. In doing so, Miéville's work can be read as an alternative vision of urban design in the Anthropocene: one that not only offers an interruption of environmentalitarian urbanism, by foregrounding the weird ecologies that cannot be reduced to relational configurations, but also a means by which one can begin experimenting/fabulating with alternative designed spaces that relinquish the desire for calculation and organization in favour of 'staying with the trouble'.

HETEROTOPIAS IN HAN SONG'S SCIENCE FICTION

Loïc Aloisio, Aix-Marseilles University

ABSTRACT

Michel Foucault uses the medical term “heterotopia”—which originally refers to the presence of an organ or tissues in a place where they shouldn’t be—to describe a place that exists in reality and is used as a mirror, thus reflecting certain values of the culture and the society in which it exists. These heterotopias therefore tell us something about these cultures and societies, whether it be with their characteristics or their separateness. Henceforth, I will use this concept to illustrate how Han Song uses these “other places” to comment on the society described in his works. Han Song likes to use enclosed or isolated spaces (such as subways, trains, airplanes, islands, hospitals, etc.), in which characters face alternative realities and social orders. These “other places” are then used as a magnifying lens or an inverted mirror of the author’s reality; thereby emphasizing the most pressing issues current Chinese society is facing today.