

# **SUBLIME COGNITION: SCIENCE FICTION AND METAPHYSICS (SEPTEMBER 14-15, 2018)**

Conference Report by Katie Stone

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***Sublime Cognition: Science Fiction and Metaphysics. Birkbeck, University of London, UK, 14-15 September 2018***

The metaphysical affinities of Science Fiction (SF), from the proliferation of occultism in SF to the genre's endless fascination with the sublime, are often effaced within SF criticism. As Aren Roukema (Birkbeck, UK) indicated in his opening remarks, SF has often been defined in opposition to the mystical, the spiritual, or the numinous. This conference, then, can be understood as providing a welcome critical intervention into the field. The overwhelming sense articulated by the conference's speakers was that not only is SF brimming with texts which take the metaphysical as their subject, but study of the genre more broadly can be enriched if one thinks beyond the binary oppositions which dominate the critical conversation surrounding SF; oppositions between science and metaphysics, empiricism and religion, cognition, and the sublime.

Conference organisers Roukema, Rhodri Davies (Birkbeck, UK), and Francis Gene-Rowe (Royal Holloway, UK), who form the organisational body of the London Science Fiction Research Community (LSFRC), opened the conference on Friday morning. Their explanation of the rationale behind the conference provided a firm foundation for what was to be two days of lively discussion in which seemingly well-established terms, such as 'the sublime,' 'Science Fiction,' and indeed 'science' were subjected to the closest scrutiny. Davies also helpfully positioned the conference in relation to the monthly reading group, also organised by LSFRC, which this year shared the theme of 'Sublime Cognition.' The fact that this conference was the product of a year of discussion and thought upon the part of many of the delegates certainly contributed to both its welcoming atmosphere and to the depth and breadth of the conversations which developed throughout the following two days.

*Sublime Cognition* began in earnest with Roger Luckhurst's (Birkbeck, UK) keynote on Gareth Edwards's 2010 film *Monsters*. Luckhurst's talk centered upon a close reading of just five minutes of the film. However, despite the compact nature of his central text, his reading drew on an expansive array of critical tools, from Longinus's theory of the sublime, to Jeffrey Cohen's Monster Theory, and on to a detailed discussion of the film's socio-political context; centering upon the highly volatile zone surrounding the Mexican-US border. Rather than arguing that *Monsters* deserves a place within a canon of 'Sublime SF,' Luckhurst provided a history of modes of reading which integrate the sublime and the cognitive, thus setting the tone for the remainder of the conference. His audience was encouraged to see the sublime as a way to engage with the political urgencies and material concerns evoked by SF, rather than a way to escape from them.

The rest of the day's panels were organised in parallel to one another so, due to my own limitations in the physical world, I was only able to attend half of them. The first of these was entitled "The Metaphysics of Cyberpunk" and featured talks from Gwilym Eades (Royal Holloway, UK) and Sasha Myerson (Birkbeck, UK). The panel as a whole covered a wide range of texts from classics of the genre such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), to the less well-known territory of Japanese television series, *Serial Experiments Lain* (1998). Following from Luckhurst's keynote, although Myerson did draw attention to the explicit references to divinity in the anime which was her subject, both speakers were principally concerned with the metaphysical as a critical tool of use in the exploration of the philosophical (Eades) and spatial (Myerson) implications of Cyberpunk. The relationship of cyberspace to the metaphysical – as discussed by Myerson in her fascinating study of non-Cartesian space – was particularly illuminating and the discussion after the panel focused upon mind/body dualism as a foundational concept of both Cyberpunk and Western theology.

This panel was followed by "The Ineffable Encounter," which brought together Kerry Dodd's (Lancaster University, UK) research into the cosmic sublime with Evert Jan van Leeuwen's (Leiden University, Netherlands) study of transcendentalism in SF. By examining the metaphysical implications of looking into the depths of "unplumbed space" (H. P. Lovecraft) alongside Ralph Waldo Emerson's invisible eyeball, Dodd and Jan van Leeuwen's panel situated the sublime beyond the human. Although the cosmic and pastoral frameworks which their papers were respectively structured around initially appeared disparate, their shared concerns with a posthuman perspective, indebted to Object-Oriented Ontology, made for a cohesive panel. Meanwhile, Dodd's choice of texts with connections to the New Weird – M. John Harrison's *Kefahuchi Tract* trilogy (2002-2012) – suggested the genre-defying possibilities of 'Sublime Cognition' as a term which challenges definitions of SF that exclude the numinous subject of Weirdness.

Mattia Petricola's (University of Bologna, Italy) paper, "The Re-Enchantment of SF," which opened the following panel, offered perhaps the most direct engagement with the theme of 'Sublime Cognition.' His mapping of SF's two poles, which he associated with the transcendent and the immanent, provided a useful method for connecting the 'ineffable' subject matter of the previous panel to the perceived empiricism of hard SF. Farzad Mahootian's (New York University, USA) study of Stanislaw Lem's *GOLEM XIV* (1981), meanwhile, spoke interestingly to Petricola's theorisation of SF as cultural practice; demonstrating that a similar opposition, between pure intellect and physical reality, is at work both in current research into Artificial Intelligence and in Lem's depiction of said research.

One of the day's final panels included papers from Katie Stone (Birkbeck, UK) and Luke Jones (Cass School of Art, Architecture and Design, UK). Stone's paper focused upon the question of divine creation in SF. She explored the ways in which feminist SF writers have sought to challenge mainstream SF's valorisation of the singular, male, figure of the creator-scientist in favour of the plural, queer regenerations of the cyborg. Meanwhile, Jones's paper discussed Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), with a particular emphasis on the doubled effect of the glass city in the novel. In

Jones's theory, glass promises both the practical benefit of transparency and the (perhaps sublime) distorted refractions which gave this panel its name of "Refracted Utopias." This was one of several papers delivered throughout the conference where the speaker's background was not in the study of literature, as Jones is an architect. This not only added to the freshness of his perspective, it demonstrated that the relevance of science-fictional metaphysics stretches far beyond the study of genre fiction.

SF's connection to seemingly non-science-fictional, material practice, discussed by Jones, was also stressed in the discussion session which ended the first day. Here Roukema, Davies, Eli Lee, and Stone provided perspectives on the connection between 'Cognition and the Sublime' in SF, with Lee's take on Ursula K. Le Guin's Taoism providing a helpfully concrete instance of how such a connection might be thought through. The ensuing discussion, in contrast to many of the papers throughout the day, dealt less with 'the sublime' as a philosophical concept and more with the practice of religion, science, and magic. While no consensus was reached, as is the nature of such a discussion, there were many helpful guidelines provided, including Mahootian's point that there is no such thing as a unified concept of 'science' and Yen Ooi's reminder that the opposition between religion and science, which underpinned much of the day's discussion, is a specifically Western construction. This was a helpful note on which to leave the first day of the conference in preparation to further challenge our conceptions of what is meant by 'Sublime Cognition' on the following day.

Returning on the second day, we all sat down to Helen De Cruz's (Oxford Brookes University, UK) keynote: "What Speculative Fiction Can Offer the Philosophy of Religion." De Cruz, whose background is in analytical philosophy, stressed the similarities between the work of SF writers and philosophers, both of whom are involved in asking 'what if' questions. This input, from someone outside the field of SF studies, served to widen the field of debate on the second day and prevent discussion from settling into the patterns SF critics have become so familiar with.

Following de Cruz's keynote, I attended the "Psychical Fringes" panel. From Amanda Pavani (Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil) and Rob Mayo's (Independent, UK) investigations of science fictional representations of mental and physical illness, to Glyn Morgan's (Independent, UK) research into Fantastic Holocaust narratives, this was a panel which pressed on the boundaries of what SF has been, as well as what it could become. Discussion after the panel focused on the negative sublime, the unspeakability of suffering, and the banality of evil, which made for lively debate, albeit related to very grim subject matter.

I was then lucky enough to chair a panel on "Occultural Science Fiction." This was comprised of three engaging papers on visual culture: Ethan Doyle White's (University College London, UK) on the television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-2017), Hallvard Haug's (Birkbeck, UK) on the comic book series *Injection* (2015-Present) and Dan Byrne-Smith's (University of the Arts London, UK) on the comic book series *Saga* (2012-present). While each paper offered a novel engagement with the relationship between SF and the occult, Byrne-Smith's paper – where audience members read from a slide show while the lights were turned down and he played on a synthesiser in the corner

while wearing a shiny purple shawl – was the most formally striking of the conference as a whole. Byrne-Smith's paper demonstrated that science-fictional ritual is something which scholars of SF actively participate in, as well as study, and his unusual presentation opened up possible ways of transforming those rituals.

The final panel of the day which I attended was dedicated to a single author: Philip K. Dick. Carrie Gooding (Independent, UK) convincingly argued for a reading of PKD as a "fictionalising philosopher," while Gene-Rowe – who had stepped in last minute due to the unfortunate absence of Terence Sawyers (Queen Margaret University, UK) – delivered a thought-provoking paper on the concepts of "Bad Fate and Apostolic Reading" in PKD's writing. Their papers, despite Gene-Rowe's apologies about hasty preparation, synthesised well and the resultant discussion, regarding the nature of time, fate, prophecy, and the possibility of revolutionary change, felt both philosophically and politically exciting.

The conference then came to a close with a roundtable featuring SF authors Justina Robson (UK), Jeff Noon (UK), and Professor Fiona Moore (Royal Holloway, UK). Jim Clarke (Coventry University, UK) ably chaired a conversation which touched on many of the themes raised throughout the conference through the lens of SF authorship. These writers' candour, knowledge of the field, and engagement with the idea of the sublime made for a discussion filled with both practical advice and moments where they spoke of "expressing the ineffable" (Robson) or writing "in the fissure" of the narrative machine (Noon). This combination – of the physical and metaphysical aspects of creating SF – brought the conference to a fitting close; ending with Robson's call to expand our understanding of both SF and the sublime as gendered discourses which privilege masculine perspectives.

All in all, "Sublime Cognition" offered two days of accomplished speakers working to expand our understanding of how the 'scientific' character of Science Fiction challenges, engages with, and stirs up its many and various metaphysical affinities. The sublime, negative, or otherwise, may have remained appropriately out of reach, but we were at least forced to acknowledge that, in SF, it is everywhere. Delegates were left eagerly anticipating future discussions regarding the continually evolving field of SF scholarship, as the conference concluded with the announcement of LSFRC's theme for the new year: "Networked Futures: Economics and (Re)Production in Science Fiction."

## BIONOTE

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journal, *Dandelion*, and is now co-director of the London Science Fiction Research Community, although she was not involved in the organisation of the “Sublime Cognition” conference.