

SCIENCE FICTION RESEARCH ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (JULY 1-4, 2018)

Conference report by Ezekiel Crago

"The Future of Labor." *Science Fiction Research Association Annual Conference*. Marquette University, Milwaukee, USA, 1-4 July 2018.

This year's SFRA conference theme produced insightful conversations about the meaning of both terms used: "labor" and "future." This ambiguity was made explicit in the content and context of the two keynote lectures, differing from each other in interpretation of work and the 'after' that future speculation uses to orient its difference from the present. Peter Frase (editor and contributor at *Jacobin Magazine*) used Marxist theories of labour to speculate on the theme of his book *Four Futures: Life after Capitalism* (2016). Rebekah Sheldon (Indiana University Bloomington, USA), on the other hand, used theories of biopolitics and feminism to examine the future of reproductive labour and the role of women in a society that is commodifying life while also producing ecological collapse, elaborated in her book, *The Child to Come: Life after the Human Catastrophe* (2016).

Frase's lecture investigated the imbrication of labour and technology with automation, speculating on how this accelerating process changes the meaning of work. He began with the simple question of why so many stories about the future assume that employment as we know it still exists. It seems that, in addition to the trope oft-repeated during the conference – that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism – we also must acknowledge how difficult it is to imagine a world without paid labour. The central question remains how a society values different kinds of labour, which Frase located on scales of wage, satisfaction for the worker, and usefulness to society. In this model, the unpaid, tedious, useless work of updating Twitter or Facebook can be compared with the satisfying, paid, useful labour of teaching. Likewise, the unpaid, satisfying, useless work of playing video games contrasts with the paid, tedious, useless job of telemarketing, and the unpaid, satisfying, useful work of producing music contrasts with the paid, useful, tedious toil of trash collection. He elaborated three philosophies of technology's relationship with capitalism. The first, accelerationism, posits capitalist imposition on technological development, arguing we should rid ourselves of the capitalist system and 'free' the advance of technology. The second sees it as a machine for degradation and control of workers that takes away human agency. The last positions technology as threat to life and imagines a future where it must be scaled back for ecological futurity.

Sheldon's talk focused on scientific impact on reproductive futurity treating the womb as technology using as primary texts the film *Bladerunner 2049* (2017) and the BBCA show *Orphan Black* (2013-2017). The first part of her lecture examined the theory and practice of eugenics' logic of purity coupled with anxiety over a "sterility apocalypse" threatening the reproduction

of proper subjects. The clones in *Orphan Black* are figures of this anxiety, combining Mary and Eve, fusing images of miraculous fecundity to a new Eden. Women become an allegory for nature while also being reduced to livestock. The miraculous births that subtend the narratives of both of these texts act as signs of rebirth of the natural via technology. These texts imagine a future of managed evolution or what Sheldon calls a search for the "genetic fountain of youth." In this logic, children are considered more plastic than adults, a *tabula rasa* without the specific subjectivity of fully interpellated maturity; they require guidance from adults to curb this plasticity and set their identities. The child then becomes a figure of a Future that must be managed by the Present, a national notional body that must be guided into becoming a capitalist subject. In this way life itself, the *bios*, becomes a surplus value extracted and enclosed by capitalism just as the future becomes a site of speculative surplus value. Patents on biological data, processes, and products then become a mode of engineering contingency and disaster, a eugenic, somatic capitalism that attempts to produce the miraculous, invade Eden, "lock up the mothers, and steal the children."

The first day was a travel day for many so the majority of the sessions were devoted to workshops for graduate students: "SF on the Market," facilitated by Gerry Canavan (Marquette University, USA) and Peter Sands (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA), and "Research Tech: Information and Document Tools, Services, and Workflows," facilitated by Paweł Frelik (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland).

After lunch, I attended "Space Opera," a discussion of the much-maligned subgenre of Science Fiction (SF) that attempted to not only rescue it from the label of 'escapist,' but also argue that the only people who argue against escape are those maintaining prisons. Peter Sands began with a broad discussion of the genre which investigated the way in which these epic stories can be useful tools for imagining the future even though current understanding of science and space travel indicates that such interstellar travel will probably never occur. Erin DeYoung's (Savannah State University, USA) presentation examined the Space Opera universe of the *Ancillary* (2013-2015) novels, paying close attention to slave labour that the hegemonic empire in the novels requires, called Ancillaries. These workers consist of the bodies of conquered indigenous peoples that have been 'processed' and had their brains emptied of any individual subjectivity, replaced with a hive-mind artificial intelligence. The final paper by Josh Pearson (University of California, Riverside, USA) argued for the efficacy of the post-scarcity Culture of the Iain Banks universe as a possibility for the end of toil and the transformation of life into a pleasurable game, but one not operating under a zero-sum value system in which everyone wins.

My first panel of the next morning, "Near Futures," was more of a mix than the Space Opera panel regarding the divergent ideas of 'after' discussed in the keynote addresses. Alexander Frissell (Marquette University, USA) began with an examination of the way that consumer capitalism has commodified age. Age-based thinking and bias structure the producerist discourses of our current society, and medical technology for anti-aging treats the aged body as disposable, figured in Margaret Atwood's recent novels as the ability for older people to 'upgrade' into younger bodies. Kathleen W. Taylor Kollman's (Bowling Green State University, USA) paper then argued that the time

travel agents in the Netflix television show *Travelers* (2016-) are exploited disposable labourers, especially the women, who are expected to perform extra affective labour while sublimating their own emotional life in service to “the mission.” Carmen Laguarda-Bueno (University of Zaragoza, Spain) argued for a nuanced reading of Dave Eggers’ novel *The Circle* (2013) as a speculation on the ways in which every utopia is dystopic and every dream is a nightmare for someone.

After lunch, I attended “Anthropocene.” Paweł Frelik presented a slide show of artistic speculation on climate change and its effects on urban space, using as an overarching theme the German idea of *Ruinensehnsucht*, the aesthetic longing for ruins that dates back at least to Romanticism. Nick Silcox’s (Rutgers University, USA) paper examined the digital text “What is the Future of American Football” (2016), a postmodern narrative consisting mostly of conversations between AI satellites about humanity, a humanity that has become immortal and impervious to damage and thus plays epic games of an evolved version of American football that cover hundreds of miles and sometimes take decades to resolve. Andrew Hageman (Luther College, USA) finished the panel with a look at contemporary Chinese SF work imbricated in the rise of China as a capitalist global power and one of the world’s biggest polluters.

The next day, the conference organisers tried a new mode and planned two different thematic series, one that consisted of three panels on William Gibson and another on gender. I decided to split the difference. The first panel of the morning, “Gibson 1,” began with Kylie Korsnack’s (Vanderbilt University, USA) speculation that Gibson is concerned with the cognitive dissonance of “alternative time,” where the future and past interact. Extending the narratological concept of narrative levelling, or the ability of a story to nest one narrative in another without disrupting diegetic time, she suggests a theory of temporal levelling, which allows a character to inhabit multiple nodes of time, disrupting the regulation of temporality implied by clock-time and ideologies of progress. Suzanne F. Boswell (Rutgers University, USA) examined the ways in which Gibson’s figuring of cyberspace confirms mind/body dualism and utilises a metaphor based on the European fantasy of the island as a frontier yet to be mapped, rendering the genocide and dispossession of colonialism into exploration, a process that Gibson’s novels show to be continuing, even in artificial fantasy islands like Freeside in *Neuromancer* (1984). Jake Casella’s (Positron Chicago, USA) paper used the discourse of Object-Oriented Ontology to discuss the ways in which Gibson constantly invests inanimate objects in his narratives with value and agency.

I presented on the next panel, “Apocalypse.” Alayne Peterson (University of Wisconsin-Fond du Lac, USA) began with an analysis of the recent addition to the *Mad Max* franchise, *Fury Road* (2015), which, in conversation with Sheldon’s keynote address, investigated the ways in which women’s labour is enclosed by Immortan Joe’s Citadel, resulting in their bodies becoming sites of resource extraction in the form of babies and milk. My paper looked back to the first film of the series, *Mad Max* (1979) and the way that it imagines the future of male utility in a world where nothing is produced but car crashes and dead bodies. Timothy S. Murphy (Oklahoma State University, USA) finished our bleak panel with an examination of narratives that imagine a world where humanity or all life on the planet comes to an end as a speculation on Messianic operational time, the time we are as

opposed to the time *where we are*. This is an atheistic Messianic time that offers no New Jerusalem, only the end of time recognised as the process of history.

I ended the day with "Gender 3." Emily Cox's (Independent Scholar, UK) paper investigated the figures of androids in recent film and television that depict them exclusively as women, just as digital assistants are coded with female voices. These machines do 'dirty work' and this says much about how we value types of work and how gender factors into this valence. Aurora Romero's (Vanderbilt University, USA) analysis of E.T.A. Hoffman's "Sandman" (1817) followed smoothly from the first paper in its look at the emotional labour performed by the automaton in the story and why its protagonist prefers this simulacrum over his human fiancé. Benjamin Blackman's (University of California, Davis, USA) paper then succinctly tied together the themes of the first two with a discussion of women as employed in emotional management, not only of themselves, but of men who are not supposed to know how to manage their own.

On the final day of the conference, I attended "Literary SF." Szymon P. Kukulak (Jagiellonian University, Poland) analysed Stanisław Lem's worldbuilding in *The Invincible* (1964) and compared it to his insistence in previous work on scientific realism, arguing that this novel marks a departure from a realist mode into the more reflexive humorist mode of his later 1970s work. Francis Gene-Rowe (Royal Holloway, UK) argued that the cut-up poem *Ratzinger Solo* (2016), consisting of excerpts from the autobiography of a former Pope, lines from *Star Wars* novels featuring Han Solo, and tweets from Donald Trump, indicates a problem with current society's relationship to our historical moment, which has been evacuated of meaning, that "an eternal present is an absent present."

The conference concluded with a flipped roundtable on the topic of "Jedi vs. Avengers," where we speculated on how Disney's ownership over these franchises will affect their cinematic universes and how long it will be before we see a crossover film mixing them. We agreed that the corporation's only goal is increasing shareholder value and that we must be wary of the ways in which Disney's films seem to be politically progressive as a marketing ploy and a way to enclose and capitalise discourses of diversity, sexuality, and feminism. The recurring topic of the labour required by and of the audiences of these franchises provided a fitting echo of previous conversations from throughout the conference. All in all, it was a rewarding end to four highly stimulating days spent speculating and working on the future of labour.

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Ezekiel Crago is a PhD candidate at the University of California at Riverside, U.S.A. In his dissertation, he traces the outlines of a post-industrial postmodern model of manhood, an "apocalyptic masculinity" articulated in the post-apocalyptic film genre that appeared in 1950s Hollywood that imagines of the role of hegemonic patriarchal white masculinity in a world where traditional masculinist discourses no longer make sense. These became particularly fraught in the decade of the 1970s, a pivotal crisis for American politics, economy, and identity discourses, a time when the popular imagination of Americans reoriented itself in relation to class, race, gender, and sexuality.