

# BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

## GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

Engaging with the World and the Planet  
in Contemporary Dystopian and Speculative Narratives



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DIPARTIMENTO DI LINGUE, LETTERATURE  
E CULTURE MODERNE



UNIVERSITÀ  
DI TORINO

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# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

Engaging with the World and the Planet in Contemporary Dystopian and Speculative Narratives

## Panel 1

Alan N. Shapiro

### A New Alternative to Capitalism

The luminary post-Marxist thinkers Fredric Jameson and Mark Fisher famously said that, in the era of neoliberalism and globalization, it was easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. After the dissipation of the New Left and the fall of the Soviet Union (the end of the Cold War), monopoly capitalism was left with no challengers and achieved universal hegemony. Yet today, the extreme dangers of pure capitalism are plain to see. Capitalism has pushed humanity, the planet, the citizenry, and the “world order” to the brink. Things have gotten very bad: ecological catastrophe, return of far-right fascism, the election of a madman as President of the United States, obscene wealth and power in the hands of multi-billionaire oligarchs, post-truth echo chambers and filter bubbles in the crisis of democracy, and the design and implementation of AI algorithms to manipulate and brainwash the populace, and incite hatred, on the “social media” and surveillance digital online platforms.

But let us give the “radical left lunatics” – as Donald Trump calls us – a new voice. Now is the moment to revisit and reconsider the concepts of full-fledged democratic socialism and even “Communism” as social and economic systems, which were defeated and discredited at the end of the twentieth century. Socialism had the humanly great and morally decent idea of having a political instance of society that acts for the common good of all its members: guaranteeing human rights like health care, education, and decent housing; overcoming poverty and ensuring efficient distribution of resources; promoting social justice and equality of economic opportunity; enabling creative and fulfilling work; and advancing worker safety and environmental protection, and so on. Yet socialism lost the ideological war to capitalism.

Let us consider two of the main arguments for the alleged superiority of capitalism over socialism. Both these arguments were valid in the past. But now we have technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, ubiquitous computing, blockchain, and the Brain-Computer Interface. So far, these technologies have been devised and deployed only to deepen the power and control of big corporation capitalism over our lives. Instead, our project is to think about how AI, VR, and other new science fictional media could be architected and realized in a utopian socialist way entirely independent of capitalism.

The first big twentieth-century argument for the superiority of capitalism over socialism was that, under socialism (Communism), a new social class of power-hungry and corrupt humans came to power while claiming to make a good society. The second main argument for the alleged superiority of capitalism over socialism was that there must be money and the reward of getting rich to encourage entrepreneurship and innovation.

Considering the advanced digital media technologies, it is possible in the twenty-first century to refute both these arguments for the superiority of capitalism over socialism. Clues about solving both conundrums of socialism can be found in science fiction narratives such as *Star Trek*, *Ready Player One*, *Moon*, and *I, Robot*.

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## Panel 1

Luca Salvi

### Predetermination and Ineffectiveness. Notes on the Paralysis of Agency

"Anthropocene" is the name of a paralysis. The rise of this concept, which has become central for reflecting on the ecological, economic and political issues of our time, indeed marks a profound crisis of agency. The planetary scope of the events that the Anthropocene seeks to describe and their inherent systemic complexity exceed the traditional categories of political and individual action. This condition generates a widespread sense of impotence, in which usual practices of intervention appear inadequate or symbolically ineffective. As both Bruno Latour (2015) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2021) observe, human action is displaced within a network of interdependencies where the distinction between nature and society collapses, and with it, the very foundations of modern agency. This results in an operational paralysis that is epistemological, ethical and ontological at once.

Starting from these premises, the aim of this intervention is to explore some examples of contemporary Latin American speculative fiction in order to reflect on how literary discourses attempt to address the ecological and political disaster of the Anthropocene, staging paralysis as an essential condition of the human in our time. In particular, the paper will examine two short stories by authors Liliana Colanzi ("Nuestro mundo muerto", 2016) and Giovanna Rivero ("Hermano ciervo", 2021), which, at a first glance, appear as works that strongly criticize the ecological and social disasters surrounding us. The paper aims to explore the imaginaries of disintegration of agency that these two texts present, relating them to the broader literary production of both authors and other contemporary Latin American texts. In both stories, the pressure of a fragmented world, seen from the perspectives of the two protagonists and narrators, is directly reflected in the constitution of subjects marked by a deep sense of impotence. However, this subjectivation through impotence, thematized in discourses that obsessively stage frustrated imaginaries of motherhood, undermines, throughout the texts, the narrators' very ability to establish a productive relationship between the present disaster and hypothetical yet vital forms of possible futures.

Primarily, through the reading of the texts, this paper will attempt to answer the following questions: What are the forms of impotence that permeate the texts under examination? What are, beyond the historical contingency that Isabelle Stengers (2009) has defined as the "age of catastrophes", the origins of this inability to think action when a world on the brink of collapse looms on the horizon? And finally, what does it mean when literature, while openly aligning itself against the disaster and its causes, fails to develop alternative imaginaries to that very state of things?

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## Panel 1

Federica Moscatelli

### Rethinking Eco-Catastrophe: Local and Global Perspectives from Latin America

This proposal engages in the ongoing debate on the effects of the globalization of the literary space and the hegemony exerted by certain strands of literary criticism in shaping categories such as ecology, post-humanism, and interspecies relations. Specifically, it examines how a global issue like climate change has spurred the development of numerous local narratives proposing a post-human, eco-sustainable future. Following the publication of various essays on the subject by scholars, particularly in the Anglo-American context (such as Donna Haraway), we have witnessed an intense proliferation of eco-dystopian and post-humanist cultural products. However, the analytical model for these products remains closely tied to a particular way of conceptualizing the human and non-human world according to Western logics, which continue to assert themselves as global.

This presentation, however, aims to introduce two examples of eco-dystopian narratives that combine both local and global dimensions – *El vasto territorio* (2021) by Simón López Trujillo and *Este vacío que hierve* (2022) by Jorge Comensal – and offer different analytical perspectives originating from one of the so-called “peripheries of the world”. In fact, Latin American literatures, with their hybrid and syncretic nature, have always been a generative center for a plural, interspecies imagination. This type of literature, often considered at the margins of literary discourse, reclaims a central position in the universal conversation about the environmental risks of our time and the potential solutions that literature can propose. In other words, the insights provided by Latin American literature are not only thematic but also formal, offering space to think about literature in an alternative and communitarian way.



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## Panel 1

Alessandra Vannucci

### Observing some Amerindian Propositions About the End of the World

I observe some recent expressions of Brazilian indigenous people's imagery about the end of the world, getting started by the idea, expressed more than half a century ago by Ernesto De Martino, that it has already happened for most human populations, because what is the end of the world «if not always the end of one's own world?» (DE MARTINO, 1977). Thus, from the indigenous nations' position of those who were subjected to the colonial invasion six centuries ago and still suffer a systemic expropriation by the capitalist production regime, the end of the world is us. Us, the non-natives, those who land from outside planting flags and drawing borders where there where none. Native people genocide was also an epistemicide; those who survived had to be witnesses to the ongoing destruction of their natural and cultural habitat. In order to bring out some alternative propositions to the recent Western dystopian perspectives, it matters here not to dissolve some recent Amerindian aesthetic and philosophical productions, or inspired by, into a generic eco-environmentalist claim; but to place them in the Congress proposed debate about how «to identify possible social transformations and imagine new forms of trans-national and trans-species alliances in the common vulnerability and precariousness» so as to, through the debate, «get ready for the present».

Survival from the colonial catastrophes has aroused other metaphysics which are resilient to concrete and ongoing threats of extinction that concerns indigenous peoples and in which preserving the human does not necessarily mean to preserve Western civilization. Instead, subaltern resistance to colonial and post-colonial hegemony incessantly tries to re-signify the world after the end of (our, their) world (KRENAK, 2020). I will especially observe Davi Kopenawa, a Yanomami Shaman, ideas expressed in his autobiography *La chute du ciel* (KOPENAWA-ALBERT, 2014) and how they affect Claudia Andujar work (1978, 1979, 2019), a Swiss born photographer to a Jewish-Romanian family that was exterminated in concentration camps, landed in Brazil as a refugee, in 1955 after a decade-long training in New York. Her first reportage on Yanomami people and culture was published on «Life» magazine in 1971; then by «Realidade» in São Paulo and all of her following reports, during the 70's were supported by Fulbright and MOMA grants. Leaving behind Europe, New York, São Paulo, Andujar experiences not just a trans-border and wild existence but another aesthetic and cognitive regime, in which the Western worldview gives way to the shamanic one. As a photographer, she 'becomes indigenous' meaning she escapes abstraction process (camera itself) whose risk is to reduce subjects into objects for human use and consumption. See above picture whose title is *Fall of Heaven, or The End of the World* (1979), it does not represent human reality torn apart by the Apocalypse but the magical animistic multi-dimensions that inhabits it.



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## Panel 2

Beatrice Masi

### Apocalypses We Live Through: A Reading of Paul Lynch's *Grace* (2020)

This paper analyses Paul Lynch's *Grace* (2020) as an apocalyptic narrative. Although the novel does not explicitly frame itself as a traditional apocalypse, it presents numerous elements characteristic of the genre. The story follows a young girl, Grace, sent by her mother to seek work and fortune during the devastating years of the Irish Great Famine. The Irish landscape is depicted as a wasteland, representing a world that has ceased to exist. As Keohane and Kuhling note, "The Famine (in Irish an Gorta, meaning 'hurt,' 'injury,' or 'wound') is the collective historical mortal wound that killed traditional Ireland, and at the same time, an Gorta Mór – the great wound – is the primal scene of pain, horror, and torment that gives birth to Modern Ireland" (2004: 173). By analysing *Grace* through the lens of apocalypse, this paper explores the connection between fictional and material apocalypses, emphasizing the significance of localized apocalypses within the material geographies of systemic shocks in the capitalist world system.

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## Panel 2

Miłosz Wojtyna

### The Rhetoric of Resilience and Resistance in Contemporary Dystopian TV Series

In this paper, I discuss the presentation of resilient communities and their resistance to political, technological, or environmental oppression in selected contemporary dystopian TV series. My focus is on the rhetoric of resistance and resilience and the communicative means communities and individuals employ in response to uncertainty, oppression, violence, and imminent disaster. The selection of texts under discussion includes American, British, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, and Spanish television narratives that explore the intersections of personal liberty, collective identity, and survival in confrontation with technofeudalism, climate change, epidemic, and resulting apocalypse. Basing on such analysis, I argue that a striking paradox can be observed in many contemporary serialized TV dystopian narratives: while most of them gravitate towards the exploration of exhaustion, despair, and disengagement, their narrative composition – and a systematic focus on character agency and actantial power – promotes reassuring plot structures that focus on resilience-and-resistance rather than failure and despair. Through such a paradox, these series construct a vision of the political future of the planet in which crises are productive of political revival and social progress. In my argument, I rely on methodological tools of contemporary narratology on the one hand, and on the writings of Gregory Clays, Byung-Chul Han, Ingo Niermann, Hartmut Rosa, and Bernard Stiegler on the other.

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## Panel 2

Kanya Viljoen

### When 'I' Becomes 'We': Collective Resistance as Collective Reimagination

In May 2015, the murder of 14-year-old Chiara Páez in Argentina ignited mass protests against gender-based violence, marking the birth of the #NiUnaMenos movement. That same year, footage of Arlette Contreras being brutally assaulted by her partner in Peru catalysed the largest demonstration in the country's history. In 2019, the rape and murder of Uyinene Mrwetyana in South Africa ruptured public consciousness, triggering the #AmlNext protests. These events, though rooted in specific geographies, exemplify how singular instances of violence transcend borders, transforming individual trauma into a shared political demand through collective resistance.

This paper examines how these protest movements function as speculative acts of world-building, where dystopian realities of systemic violence are confronted and reimaged through embodied resistance. By positioning protest as a performative act, I explore how the interplay between narrative and assembly blurs the boundaries between the personal and the collective, between visibility and invisibility, between mourning and mobilisation. These protests create a liminal space—where identity is both asserted and dissolved, where singularity becomes multiplicity, and where individual grief is reshaped into communal action. Drawing from performance studies by Butler (2015), Lehmann (2014) and cultural theory (Nünning, 2020), I analyse how resistance is enacted across multiple platforms—streets, digital spaces, and artistic interventions—demonstrating how movements like #NiUnaMenos and #AmlNext operate as transmedial narratives. Chants, placards, viral hashtags, and public demonstrations transform personal testimony into collective mythmaking, challenging existing power structures while forging new imaginaries of justice. Through this lens, I argue that protests function as both a rupture and a reinvention: they expose dystopian conditions while simultaneously constructing speculative futures, where new possibilities for resistance and solidarity emerge.

By interrogating the performative and transmedial nature of these movements, this paper situates contemporary protest as a dynamic intersection of narrative, embodiment, and speculative reimagination—one where the act of assembly is not only an act of defiance, but a method of world-making.

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## Panel 2

Alessia Polatti

### From Utopia to Dystopia: the “Island” as a Space of Sociopolitical Estrangement and Liquid Modernity in the Recent Immigration Novel

In anglophone literature, islands have often been articulated as utopias or dystopias, Edens or cultural crossroads – i.e. William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611), Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883), H. G. Wells’ *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954) among others. They have always been seen as thresholds of identities, and place here and elsewhere in dialogue. In particular, since the beginning of the modern era the trope of the island as a utopian place has been emblematic, from the publication of Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) to Aldous Huxley’s contemporary version, *Island* (1962).

The aim of my paper, however, is to analyse the island from the opposite standpoint, that is as a dystopian space of collision among different people and different stories. In order to do so, I will analyse it through the lens of migrant literature. Therefore, the investigation will follow the concept of “island” from its utopian until its dystopian meaning, by examining its potential nature as a space of sociopolitical estrangement in the connection between dystopia and migration. In other words, the paper intends to demonstrate that migrant literature employs the island metaphor as an image for sociopolitical or ontological conditions, a way to describe not only the current world state of capitalist disorders and conflicts, but also the disheartening reality of destructiveness we are living. As a result, islands are seen as a complex and multifaceted concept that emerges from a “deeply visceral lived experience” (Hay 2006: 34). They are not isolated entities; they possess a tapestry of cultural, social, and environmental elements that shape and define the existence of who is inside, or comes from outside, the territory. Moreover, the paper seeks to demonstrate that migrant literature portrays islands as universes of social transformations, while it also imagines them as worlds where new forms – both positive and negative – of trans-national and human alliances can be built or destroyed, following the idea of liquid society theorised by Zygmunt Bauman (1999).

Then, recent island’s discourses have actually been characterised by constant re-negotiations, ranging from constructs of the insular as spaces of isolation and backwardness to concepts of interconnectedness and fluidity. The paper affirms that the current dystopic times are promoting a return to feelings of exclusion and inaccessibility, especially for those who are escaping from wars and tragedies. Thus, islands become liminal spaces or limbos for migrants, and a nightmarish universe without human empathy. This evolution can be seen in recent immigration novels, such as *Beautiful Animals* (2017) by Lawrence Osborne, *Exist West* (2017) by Mohsin Hamid, *The Wall* by John Lanchester (2019), and Karen Jennings’s *An island* (2019). These novels are very distant from the image given by More or Huxley – where ideal societies were introduced to demonstrate the possible erection of peaceful nation-states. They share, instead, pessimistic visions of a world characterised by images of human and natural disasters, a world where islands symbolise obscure rites of passages, places of transitions, and dystopian borderlands, thus defining also the current sociopolitical turmoil.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 3

Giulia Baselica

### From the "Noon Universe" to James Cameron's Avatar: the Story of a Revelatory Dystopia

Between 1962 and 1985, the famous Soviet writers Arkadij and Boris Strugakij published a cycle of thirteen novels based on the meta-world of Polden' (Noon). The cycle of the "Noon Universe" – a name derived from the first novel, Noon, XXII Century (The Return) – includes three novels (The Inhabited Island, The Beetle in the Anti-Hill, The Time Wanderers) connected by the character of Maksim Kammerer. As a Progressor, he is endowed with a highly developed intellect and his mission is to contribute to the evolution of civilisations on a lower social level. Kammerer is also tasked with investigating the true identity of Lev Abalkin, a humanoid with strange behaviour. The presence of the planet Pandora, a wild and primordial place, recurs in the novels of the 'Noon Universe' cycle. It is central to the novel Disquiet and the object of reflection for the character of Leonid Gorbovskij, who is aware of the threat that hangs over humanity, which is prey to the desire to conquer the universe: perhaps it will be Pandora itself that will punish man's excessive ambition.

The tragic prophecy of the future developed by Strugakhi in Soviet times takes on a completely different meaning in the film Avatar by the famous American director James Cameron. Here the viewer finds the planet Pandora, covered with rainforests and inhabited by humanoids; the Avatars, creatures reminiscent of Abalkin's character; the hero, ex-marine Jake Sully, ideal reincarnation of biologist Mikhail Sidorov, also the protagonist of an important mission.

In Cameron's film, however, Strugak's dystopia becomes a metaphorical snapshot of the present, perhaps on the verge of catastrophe, and characterised, perhaps providentially, by an open ending, as in the stories of Arkadij and Boris Strugakij: a new start for the hero on a journey to another dimension.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the essential features of a narrative that, by generating complex plots set in distinctly different periods and contexts, vividly illustrates the continuity of a vision that changes over time and reflects the wicked folly of human ambition.

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## Panel 3

Maja Vodopivec

### How Do the Past, Present, and Future Interact in Post-3.11 Japan? Examining Urban Utopia in the SF Manga *Coppelion*

The key concern of this presentation will be historical memory in postwar Japan and its representation in a mega-city once dreamt of as an urban utopia, such as Tokyo. This presentation will thus examine how politics have been constituted in Japan after 3.11 by re-reading a pre-3.11 SF comic that foreshadowed an irradiated future. *Coppelion*, a futuristic story about a 2016 nuclear catastrophe in Tokyo's Odaiba district triggered by an earthquake, surprisingly speaks to the post-3.11 condition in multiple ways. I will utilise the SF genre and an urban utopian narrative such as that of *Coppelion* as a representational form of the collages of the pre-and-postwar experience of the Japanese people. The SF genre is typically and uniquely characterised by an explicit intertextuality (Jameson 2005, 2) and its narrative is essentially based on a reality principle and 'made up of bits and pieces of the here and now' (Jameson 2005, xiii). This principle means nothing else but that our imaginations are 'hostages to our own mode of production (and perhaps to whatever remnants of past ones it has preserved' (Jameson 2005, xiii). Suvin calls it a literature of cognitive estrangement where the 'differing strangers are a mirror to man just as the differing country is a mirror for his world' (Suvin 1979, 4). Suvin based his theorisation on the work of Brecht and his concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* or the attitude of estrangement, expressed in his *Short Organon for the Theatre* as 'a representation which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar' (Suvin 1979, 6). It is through the study of this underlying attitude and formal framework of the SF genre that this presentation will attempt to answer a revolving question about a paradoxical situation in which the future may be imagined only if we deeply associate it with the past (Jameson 2005, 4).

The aim of reading Japanese history through a science-fiction comic that in a surprising way tells us what may come next is a part of a popular reconceptualisation of the past, present and futurity. It provides us with an opportunity to trace the overlooked continuities in Japanese modern, wartime, and postwar history, and also helps us scrutinise their complexities and the way they are being experienced (Iovene 2014, 5).

In this presentation I will explore an SF representation of a nuclear disaster in Tokyo, which became a forgotten 'ghost city,' and argue that it is deeply related to a contested postwar problematic that is increasingly discussed. It is in the context of Japan's open aspirations to become a full-fledged military contributor to a new world order that the manga draws parallels with World War II, and before that, with the inter-war period of 1920s and 1930s Japan, as also with a postwar urban utopia imagined by the famous Metabolist Group of architects represented by Kenzo Tange. Framed within the contexts of the nuclear, science, modernity, and urban utopianism, the manga represents a criticism of a commodification of lives in times when the notion of the progress of humanity is under the dark shadow of a resurrected past that threatens to repeat itself.

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## Panel 3

Maria Varsam

### Liminal Existence and the Fantastic in Yōko Ogawa's Existential Dystopia, *The Memory Police*

The dystopia as a genre which emerged with distinct characteristics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is most often associated with classic texts such as *1984*, *Brave New World* and *We*; as a consequence, it has inevitably persisted in literary and cultural history as one associated with authoritarianism, surveillance and social alienation. In recent decades, it has borrowed generic characteristics from other traditional genres, without necessarily rejecting the salient features of these early influential texts. This 'genre blurring' (Baccolini) has radically transformed the poetics of contemporary dystopian narratives and has led to the creation of hybrid literary texts beyond the English speaking world which creatively employ the conventions of the classic dystopia in order to shape new forms of the dystopian mode, including cross-fertilizations with the thriller, the horror and the fantastic.

Yōko Ogawa's novel, *The Memory Police* (original title *The Secret Crystallization*, 1994) translated from the Japanese in 2019, employs the dystopian mode's most well-known aspects to present a world of radical de-familiarization and self-alienation by utilizing key aesthetic features of the fantastic, as defined by Tzvetan Todorov in *The Fantastic* (1970). The novel challenges the reader to question the nature of reality in the narrative through the lens of an unnamed narrator/writer residing in an unnamed island where material and natural objects suddenly disappear or are destroyed in the effort to erase the memory of their existence. With echoes of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), books are also destroyed, causing the narrator to question the purpose of continuing her effort in composing a novel. A minority of citizens is revealed to possess the ability to continue to remember and are hounded down by the 'memory police' whose task is to ensure the elimination of individuals who attempt to hide these objects and with them the significance of their memory. Eventually, the bodily parts of the majority begin to disappear, whether they are found guilty of retaining their memories or not.

This paper will trace the effect the loss of memory has on subjectivity, agency and community through the characters' reactions to the mounting loss of the world as they know it as well as the importance of affect in the social fabric of the island's inhabitants. Through the fruitful inter-mingling of the fantastic with the dystopian, the reader's experience mirrors that of the narrator's confusion in interpreting the world as it collapses around her, not knowing how to prevent its destruction. Thus, rather than presenting the pedagogical message as clear warning of future consequences typical of the dystopia, the infusion of the fantastic forces readers to confront ontological questions concerning the meaning of their existence and the importance of the past in forging the future.



# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

Engaging with the World and the Planet in Contemporary Dystopian and Speculative Narratives

## Panel 3

Marilena Parlati

### Suspended Apocalypse, Traumas of Anticipation, and a Lost Paradise: *On the Beach* by Nevil Shute (1957)

This paper draws on Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," Joseph Masco's "nuclear uncanny," and Gabriele Schwab's "nuclear necropolitics" to read Nevil Shute's 1957 novel *On the Beach*, focusing on themes of suspended apocalypse and anticipatory trauma. Shute's text (and the ensuing 1959 film version) portrayed a very white Australia depicted as a stereotypical paradise of environmental and domestic bliss, a fictional (and imaginary) world both 'innocent' and doomed by the imminent arrival of nuclear fallout, and thus by slow and inexorable annihilation.

This paper incorporates Masco's suggestions on New Mexico with the context of Cold War nervous propaganda and fears. I wish to explore how the incipient introduction of toxic air into the novel's everyday environments produces a profound sense of estrangement, disrupting any notion of home and safety. This "nuclear uncanny" is a source of pervasive anxiety that transforms familiar spaces into alien, threatening landscapes. Schwab's concept of "nuclear necropolitics" does not only serve to read the nuclear anxieties of a past that is now globally read as safely distant. It can also be employed to investigate the long-term implications of nuclear technology and discourse, both military and allegedly 'pacific', which since 1945 have been moulding new forms of biopolitical control, altering any simplistic perception of time, and affecting both real and imaginary communities, namely those traditionally marginalized and exploited by liberal technopowers.

In 1956, the German thinker and strenuous pacifist Gunther Anders started challenging his readers to confront the psychological and ethical implications of living in what he defined as a "barely-still existent" present. In *The Obsolescence of Man*, Anders raised questions about progress, future planning (and a reasonable planning of the future), and the very nature of human civilization in the shadow of potential self-annihilation. Reflecting on Anders' words can still help to grasp the unique temporal and existential tension of 'our' nuclear age, where the present is constantly overshadowed by the possibility of a future that may abruptly cease to exist but where, surprisingly, the very porous distribution of atomic isotopes and waste is generally kept at a conscious remove.

By synthesizing these perspectives, I also aim to highlight the surprising removal in Shute's novel and 'white Australia' context of the actual use in the 1950s and 1960s of Australian Aboriginal territories as nuclear testing grounds, drawing parallels between Shute's fictional narrative and contemporary realities of environmental degradation and geopolitical tensions.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 4

Natalija Pop Zarieva and Krste Iliev

### Transnational Deep Ecologies: Comparative Eco-Consciousness in Le Guin's "Always Coming Home" and Crvenkovska's "The House Above the Waves"

This paper explores the presence of deep ecological thought in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* and Biljana Crvenkovska's *Куќа над брановите* (*The House Above the Waves*), focusing on the ways in which both texts embody an environmental consciousness rooted in interconnectedness, humility before nature, and non-anthropocentric values. Drawing on Arne Naess's principles of Deep Ecology, the paper examines how Le Guin constructs a fictional society (the Kesh) whose worldview is integrally ecological—marked by balance, restraint, and spiritual kinship with the land—offering an ecotopian vision of a possible future. In contrast, Crvenkovska's novel situates nature within a deeply personal and symbolic framework, where the sea becomes an extension of memory, selfhood, and transformation. While Le Guin's work projects a collective, systemic expression of ecological awareness, Crvenkovska's text internalizes that awareness, portraying nature as an intimate force shaping emotional and existential landscapes. By comparing these distinct yet resonant eco-literary visions, the paper aims to illuminate how Deep Ecology can manifest both as a cultural ethos and an individual journey. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates the flexibility of ecocritical frameworks in crossing cultural and genre boundaries, fostering a broader, transnational understanding of ecological storytelling.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

Engaging with the World and the Planet in Contemporary Dystopian and Speculative Narratives

## Panel 4

Klara Machata

### Glimpses of Solidarity: Dystopian Urban Environments in South Asian Speculative Short Fiction and Beyond

While rapid environmental change, neo-colonialism, neoliberal capitalism, and increasing authoritarianism are hardly recent developments, the cumulation of various risks that affect large parts of humanity in the 21st-century has led to widespread crisis fatigue and anxiety about the future of the planet. Yet the focus on future visions and developments that is particularly pronounced in mainstream EuroAmerican literature and scholarship often neglects the extent to which past and present inform the future. In contrast, postcolonial literatures have often been accused of being mainly concerned with the past, despite a series of future-oriented literary traditions such as Afrofuturism.

South Asian speculative fiction is a similarly well-established and important example, which frequently explores tensions between dystopian elements and utopian impulses. On the basis of a reading of two speculative short stories, Vandana Singh's "Delhi" (2004) and Saad Z Hossain's "Bring Your Own Spoon" (2017), I argue that the urban environments of the respective cities of Delhi and Dhaka emerge as both evidently dystopian and also as important sites of solidarity and resistance in face of oppression. Despite the local specificities of the settings, these texts respond to current planetary concerns such as increasing social division and environmental change. They offer compelling visions of quotidian moments of solidarity, which allows readers to find small pockets of change, miniature utopias within dystopias (Kamal 2022, 27). Speculative elements, such as time travel and supernatural beings, are integrated into visions of a recognizable, yet somewhat accelerated urban environment and the increasing social stratification is clearly perceptible in descriptions of the built environment and varying access to infrastructure. Drawing on Pheng Cheah, I want to suggest that various phenomena and experiences that are specific to Asia, which have long been considered marginal to universal history, are in fact universalizable and translatable (2007, 62). The localized visions presented in the discussed texts respond to current social and political trajectories; they serve as examples that highlight the multiplicity of South Asian realities and inspire alternatives to the status quo. In the broader context of global anglophone literature, these visions of postcolonial urban environments point towards the entanglement of past, present, and future and they draw attention to the fact that both local and planetary processes are influenced by the wider power-geometries of space. In doing so, they present compelling counter-narratives to simplistic disaster visions and they emphasize the resilience of many communities across the globe.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 4

Santiago Alarcón-Tobón

### Post-Apocalyptic Submerged Territories: An Ecocritical Reading of *El tiempo de en medio* (2021) by Enrique Lozano

This study examines the post-apocalyptic and waterlogged territory depicted in *El tiempo de en medio* (2021), a novel by the Colombian author Enrique Lozano. Employing the methodological frameworks of ecocriticism and blue humanities, this analysis highlights how the unceasing flood—referred to as the "time in between"—shapes a submerged territory that not only unveils a catastrophic present but also a past laden with social tensions and an uncertain future. The narrative is centered on the story of two siblings—Jerónimo and Emma—and their father, residing in the city of Cali (Colombia), which has been ravaged by incessant rainfall for over two decades. This climatic disaster has caused the overflow of the Cauca River, gradually submerging the city, collapsing its buildings, and forcing its inhabitants to flee. Amid the endless deluge and the fight for survival, the underlying social inequities and divisions within the city are progressively exposed. The first section of the novel portrays the family's daily life, as the father wrestles with the decision to abandon their home, while the siblings occupy themselves with makeshift games. The narrative unfolds through the imagery of migrant caravans, encounters with indigenous messenger Chasqui, and the struggle for daily survival. In contrast, the second section details the family's forced departure from their home and their subsequent journey of migration in search of refuge. This journey into exile introduces groups marked by religious fanaticism and extreme violence, while also revealing the possibility that the catastrophe was caused by concealed interests. In this regard, the submerged territory and the dystopian world that it configures serve as a critique of contemporary reality. The novel intertwines two significant events from recent Colombian history: the severe winters that have afflicted the country in the past decade—particularly affecting the Cauca River basin—and the widespread protests during the 2021 national strike, which were centered in Cali. Furthermore, the novel raises pertinent questions regarding the future, exploring how the flood reconfigures new imaginaries and provokes new inquiries into the relationships between individuals, nature, and the territory.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

Engaging with the World and the Planet in Contemporary Dystopian and Speculative Narratives

## Panel 4

Nafisa Oliveira

### From Greenwashing to Machinewashing: Pseudo-Ethics in Sustainability and Artificial Intelligence as Depicted in Dystopian Fiction

In an era where sustainability and artificial intelligence dominate corporate and technological discourse, ethical narratives often become distorted by deceptive practices. “Greenwashing” describes the superficial or misleading portrayal of environmental responsibility, whereas “Machinewashing” refers to the illusion of ethical AI through performative transparency and claims of fairness. Both concepts thrive in an environment where ethical considerations are commodified rather than genuinely integrated into decision-making processes. From the 20<sup>th</sup> century novel *Brave New World* (1932) to the 21<sup>st</sup> century series *Black Mirror* (2011–) dystopian works have long explored the dangers of such pseudo-ethics, warning against the manipulation of narratives to justify harmful practices.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the parallels between recent dystopian fiction and real-world trends in greenwashing and machinewashing, illustrating how both exploit public trust while maintaining systems of control. In addition, it attempts to explore how these narratives shape public perception and policy responses to sustainability and artificial intelligence. As machinewashing emerges as the AI-era counterpart to greenwashing, this study urges greater scepticism of ethical assertions and proposes strategies to distinguish genuine accountability from spurious gestures.

The analysis at hand relies on views of scholars from the Marxist and Utilitarian schools of thought. While Marxism critiques pseudo-ethics as a tool for maintaining capitalist dominance, Utilitarianism assesses the morality of sustainability and artificial intelligence through the principle of maximising overall happiness. By combining both perspectives, one can better understand how dystopian fiction offers valuable insights into resisting pseudo-ethics, emphasising the need for critical engagement, systemic reform, and integrity in the development of sustainability and artificial intelligence.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 5

Raffaella Baccolini

### Feminist Science Fiction of the 1970s and 1980s: Shaping Contemporary Reproductive Politics

The first presentation will explore the impact of feminist science fiction from the 1970s and 1980s on contemporary discussions of reproductive policies, abortion rights, and alternative family structures beyond heteronormativity and the constraints of race and species. Piercy's work will be placed in dialogue with the novels of Joanna Russ, Ursula K. Le Guin, Zoe Fairbairns, Octavia Butler, and Margaret Atwood. The presentation will highlight how these authors envisioned reproductive autonomy, kinship, and community-building in speculative worlds that challenge patriarchal and capitalist paradigms. By tracing these narratives' legacies, the presentation will consider their relevance to current debates on women's autonomy and reproductive justice.

Arianna Preite

### Reproductive Justice as Freedom to Not Procreate

The second presentation will analyze the novel *The Future of Another Timeline* (2019) by Annalee Newitz and the novel *Red Clocks* (2018) by Leni Zumas: both set in the United States, they imagine parallel realities and dystopian futures in which abortion is prohibited or has never been legalized. The two texts will be placed in a context – not only American – in which access to abortion is denied by neofundamentalist and neoliberal forces in the name of a spurious right to the life of the embryo that ignores the precarious conditions of existence on the planet. They will also be read in dialogue with some recent texts on the fight for access to free-safe-legal abortion and reproductive justice (Cooper 2013, Balzano 2021, Browne 2022, Harmange 2023).

Chiara Xausa

### Reproductive Justice as Climate Justice

The third presentation will investigate reproductive justice as the right to parent in secure and sustainable environments. Through an analysis of *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) by Native American author Louise Erdrich and *Birthstones* (2007) by Canadian author Phyllis Gotlieb, the discussion will highlight the intersection of reproductive and climate justice, particularly in relation to social and racial discrimination. A diffractive reading will engage foundational ecofeminist texts (Merchant 2008, Sturgeon 2010) to trace the historical roots of the contemporary debate on climate crisis as a reproductive crisis (Balzano 2021 & 2024, Clarke and Haraway 2022, Kallman and Ferorelli 2024).

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

Engaging with the World and the Planet in Contemporary Dystopian and Speculative Narratives

## Panel 6

Alis May Iseppi

### Memory, Trauma and Resilience: Dystopian Narratives in Andean Oral Tradition

Oral Andean narratives are polyphonic cultural expressions (Arnold, Yapita 2022; Viera 2013), which reflect ways of living and understanding reality. They are both transcultural products shaped by colonial oppression and spaces of resistance, engaged in processes of cultural preservation and creative reworking of exogenous elements. Moreover, oral tradition is intimately connected to a living territory interacting with humans' daily life. Andeans record their memory in the landscape, which can be seen as a dynamic text, whose elements work as mnemonic devices (Jemio 2009; Venturoli 2004).

How does Andean oral tradition offer a distinct perspective within the context of global dystopian narratives? We argue that it provides a unique lens on the topic that highlights indigenous cosmology and resilience, allowing for a broadening of the definition of dystopia. Western speculative or future-oriented narratives often focus on the consequences of oppressive systems or technological advancements, leading to societal collapse or the return to a human condition of natural barbarism in post-apocalyptic settings. In contrast, Andean oral tradition portrays a dystopian present shaped by the catastrophe and trauma of the Conquest, within the frame of a succession of eras marked by the destruction and replacement – rather than annihilation – of worlds and their inhabitants (Danowski, Viveiros de Castro 2017; Jemio 2011; Navarrete 2004).

Building on these premises, a selection of Bolivian oral narratives from the Archivo Oral of La Paz (Jemio 2005; 2011) and a corpus recorded in Tapacarí province in 2017 will be analyzed using an interdisciplinary approach that combines literary criticism with socio-historical and anthropological perspectives. Through two types of narratives, we will explore the intertextual connections between landscape, memory, trauma, and resilience in the Bolivian Andes.

The first type presents a central Andean motif: transformation into stone as punishment, symbolizing the power of ancient deities and the fragile balance between humans and a living, social territory, where reciprocity is essential for survival.

The second type consists of local narratives (Jemio 1993) from the Lake Titicaca area, where the Inka is depicted as a great builder of the pre-solar epoch. These stories suggest that the interruption of his work by colonization had irreversible consequences for the local population. In fact, a recurring motif suggests that if the Inka's work had been completed, the current conditions of the inhabitants would be better (Jemio 2011).

The subdivision of time and the cyclical nature of the Andean cosmology reflected by these narratives offer a lens through which the trauma of the Conquest is continually revisited, setting a dystopian present marked by cultural loss due to violent exogenous impositions. At the same time, it offers a space of resilience and resistance. In line with the Ikarrí myths, the stories of the giant snake guarding the gold buried by the Inka at the bottom of the lake seem to reveal the hope for the Inka's return and the coming of a Pachakuti, a process of overturning of the cosmic order through a catastrophic series of events.



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## Panel 6

Sofia Ciavarella

### Forward to the Past: *Gauchoides* and *Gaicho-Zombis* in Argentinian Speculative Fiction

In contemporary Argentinian literature, speculative fiction has emerged as a powerful tool for reinterpreting national identity and history, particularly after the 2001 political, social and economic crisis. This crisis highlighted the limitations of realism in representing a reality that could at times appear unreal, inspiring many authors to explore non-mimetic genres such as science fiction, dystopias and (post)apocalyptic narratives. While establishing a dialogue with Anglophone science fiction culture, they reterritorialise these models and influences within the Argentinian cultural and literary landscape. In fact, a key and shared feature of many contemporary works of speculative fiction is their engagement with the 19th-century national literary tradition, as they appropriate some of its elements, destabilising their role within the cultural and literary imaginary through “cognitive estrangement”.

In this presentation I will focus on one of these elements — the rewriting of the figure of the gaucho — by analysing Michel Nieva’s dystopian novel *¿Sueñan los gauchoides con ñandúes eléctricos?* (2013) and Juan Ignacio Pisano’s (post)apocalyptic novel *El viento de la pampa los vio* (2021). The gaucho as a historical and social agent was forcefully and violently integrated, either as a soldier in the Frontier War or as a labour force within the rising capitalist export economy, into the Argentinian state’s civilising project. The novels reimagine the gaucho through the lens of science fiction, transforming him into a gauchoid or a gaicho-zombi exploited as work force in soybean production fields or controlled by gauchos matreros. While the historical gaucho was eliminated or assimilated into the newly formed State, in these texts his haunting figure comes back from the past as a machine or as the remains of a human being in the context of android rebellions and zombie apocalypses.

By exploring the boundaries between human and machine, the living and the dead, the authors uncover the institutional violence over marginalized and dehumanised bodies, not only engaging with past traumas related to State violence in national history, but also addressing present-day anxieties related to technology, ecological disaster and social inequalities. Through the appropriation and recontextualisation of the tropes of speculative fiction, Nieva’s and Pisano’s novels challenge traditional representations of the national identity and history, creating a critical space for reimagining collective memory and rethinking the nation’s past, present and future.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

Engaging with the World and the Planet in Contemporary Dystopian and Speculative Narratives

## Panel 6

Brîndușa Nicolaescu

### Cyborg Voices as Hybrid Fictional Palimpsests: Narratives of (Dis)Remembering in *Cielos de la tierra* by Carmen Boullosa, *Mantra* by Rodrigo Fresán and *Speak* by Louisa Hall

The paper aims to analyze the intricate encoding of cyborg bodies, voices and memories in three novels where cyborgs serve as narrators whose reliability also appears to have been (re)encoded by “flickering signifiers” within the storyspace (Hayles, 2005).

On a narrative level, all three novels feature fictional layers and are crafted from complex interwoven texts. *Speak* is a poetic collection of different voices spanning several realms of time and space, which, arguably, were collected by AI and belong now to a superior artificial consciousness, Mary 3. *Cielos de la tierra* encompasses three interconnected manuscripts: a secret 16th-century chronicle written in Latin by Hernando de Rivas, a text by Estela Díaz, who discovers Hernando's manuscript in the 1990s, translates and preserves it, viewing it as a reflection of her own life and the testimony of Lear, a survivor from a post-apocalyptical community, who seeks to translate Estela's hidden manuscript and weaves the collapse of her civilization and the impending end of humanity into this translation. Like Boullosa's novel, Fresán's novel *Mantra* is made up of three interwoven narratives, told in the first person by different characters: Martin Mantra's young friend, a cadaver recollecting his life from an Aztec underworld and a damaged android, P.P. MAC@rio, in search of his creator Mantrax, whose voice brings all narrative threads together.

Drawing on the nature of the cyborg as both a social and fictional creature (Harraway, 1985), and also on the importance of “embodiment” (Hayles, 1999), the paper will consider the “new mythology in which the posthuman finds its forebears in the machines that helped make them” (Brown, 2010, 174). On the other hand, a special emphasis will be placed on the “efforts to memorialize disaster” (Dole et al., 2015), focusing on metaphorical and literal disembodiments illustrated by the narratives. If cyborg identities can be understood only in “context-specific cultural realities” (Brown, 2010), then the construction of posthuman narrative realities will inevitably engage with the “murmurs from the Body” (Hayles, 1999).

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## Panel 7

Laura Clark

### **A Cozy Café in an Ecological Disaster: Anticipating Isolation in *Yokohama Kaidashi Kikou* (1994–2006)**

When speculating about potential futures and the anxieties a key concern has been connection versus isolation. Do we imagine that we have built social structures that provide connection and shared physical spaces, or are we to see the continuation of the isolation and technologically-mediated relationships that typified the COVID-19 lived experience?

Separation and isolation in many ways appear to be at the heart of the modern neoliberal enterprise, and a key concern in dystopian fictions. Yet, a contradictory impulse also arises -- since the mid-1990s coffee shops and eateries have emerged as key settings for Japanese storytelling across mediums. These narratives craft the eatery as a space in which capitalism and the boundaries of public/private can be disregarded. Here the relationships between staff, customers and the literal act of consumption offer community, comfort and solutions to the challenges of modern life. More recently, we have seen a boom in the translation and reception of these works in the mainstream English-reading public -- suggesting a shared cross-cultural desire for these idealised spaces.

The 14-volume manga *Yokohama Kaidashi Kikou* melds this cozy cafe genre with the future of a Japan post-ecological disaster. The oceans have risen, travel between cities is an odyssey, technology has both reverted and advanced, and fauna and flora have transformed. In the country-side android Alpha waits for her owner to return whilst she runs a 'coffee shop'. In an all but abandoned landscape where human traffic is few and far between, this coffee shop is explicitly and intentionally disengaged from economic motives. Rather, it is a way-station for the rare traveller, through which Alpha crafts interpersonal relationships with strangers and her neighbours. In a world of scarcity, but also low demand, this slice of life narrative both romanticises and mourns the fall of humanity and the isolation that comes with it. It invites us to anticipate the fall of humanity and ecological disaster, whilst also finding comfort in decentring the modern human enterprise.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 7

María Salvador

### Medieval Futures: Augmented Pilgrimage and Virtual Ecologies in Kasuga Mandara

This paper explores medieval Japanese Mandara painting as a form of speculative visual culture through the lens of ecocriticism, cognitive estrangement, and phenomenology. Centering on the Kasuga Mandara—particularly the Kasuga Shrine Mandara (J. Kasuga miya mandara) and Kasuga Deer Mandara (J. Kasuga shika mandara)—I propose that these ritual paintings function as immersive, time-folded images that render sacred ecologies visible and animate. Rather than treating these works as static representations of a past spiritual ideal, I argue that they enact a form of “augmented realism,” in which vision, memory, and ritual collapse into an anticipatory present.

The Kasuga Mandara tradition emerged in the late Heian to Kamakura periods as part of the devotional landscape tied to the Fujiwara clan’s tutelary shrine, Kasuga Taisha, and its affiliated temple, Kōfukuji. These paintings visualize the sacred terrain of Mount Mikasa and its surrounding architecture and forest, offering substitute forms of pilgrimage through visual immersion. The numerous Shrine Mandara presents the shrine complex in a mist-shrouded bird’s-eye view, often including now-absent architectural features like the Western and Eastern Pagodas, destroyed in the fifteenth century. The also abundant Deer Mandara paintings, by contrast, center on a lone sacred deer—messenger of the kami—accompanied by changing iconographical elements. Both formats collapse celestial and terrestrial realms into a single visual field, inviting contemplative entry and multisensory engagement.

Building on Fabio Deotto’s notion of augmented realism and Darko Suvin’s theory of cognitive estrangement, I argue that these Mandara are not illustrations of a vanished world but speculative instruments. The mist and layered composition function as perceptual filters that slow the gaze, activating the viewer’s body and attention. The Mandara produce what phenomenologist Edward Casey might call a “felt directionality”—a sensory pull that shifts the viewer from passive observer to ritual participant.

The landscapes depicted in these works are not lost. The Kasuga Primeval Forest remains protected, and the sacred deer still roam freely in Nara today. Yet these images do not simply affirm continuity—they register transformation. For instance, the introduction of non-native nagi trees in the Heian period reshaped the shrine’s ecological makeup and now forms a visual and material threshold between the built environment and the sacred mountain. In this way, the Mandara also serve as ecological documents, encoding both cosmological and historical shifts.

By reframing these paintings as speculative companions rather than devotional relics, I seek to challenge disciplinary boundaries between art history, religious studies, and speculative narrative. The Kasuga Mandara are not only windows into the medieval imagination but tools for rethinking our own relationships to landscape, time, and ritual presence. In an age of ecological anxiety and perceptual fatigue, these works invite us to slow down, to look again, and to inhabit a sacred terrain that is neither past nor future—but already unfolding.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

Engaging with the World and the Planet in Contemporary Dystopian and Speculative Narratives

## Panel 7

Jordi Serrano-Muñoz

### Japan Sunk Again: The Anthropogenic Turn in *Nihon Chinbotsu: Kibō no Hito*

I explore in this presentation how our growing awareness of the anthropogenic nature of the climate crisis informs, shapes, and redefines disaster narratives in Japanese fiction and how these remain intrinsically linked to nationalist discourses about the country's present and future. To this end, I analyze *Nihon Chinbotsu: Kibō no hito*, the 2021 television adaptation of Komatsu Sakyo's novel *Nihon Chinbotsu*, originally published in 1973. Broadcast domestically on TBS and available to a global audience on Netflix, this ten-part series takes the novel's original premise—how Japan would react to the imminent and inevitable threat of being submerged in the Pacific Ocean due to a sudden shift in tectonic plates—but this time incorporating a crucial difference. Just as Komatsu's work attributes the supposed natural geological evolution of the Pacific faults as the main cause of the collapse, this adaptation blames human intervention in the environment—both historical and contemporary—as the catalyst for the disaster. Based on this anthropogenic shift, I study how this adaptation updates the same conflicts proposed by the original material—debates on the construction of a post-imperial Japanese national project, industrialism, collusion between the business and political worlds, or Japan's role in the world—with new, more current concerns, especially related to the climate crisis, but also to the power of fake news, the deterioration of democracy, and immigration policies in Japan. My objective is not only to explore what has changed in these last fifty years in terms of themes and debates between the original and the adaptation, but also to demonstrate how the current post-3/11 paradigm reinforces a way of understanding socio-environmental conflicts as part of a rhizomatic system of multi-crisis.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 8

Sayantina Dutta

### Beyond Human and Machine: The Intersection of Gender, Nature, and AI in *Klara and the Sun*

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Klara and the Sun* (2021) offers a compelling narrative that reinterprets the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in human civilisation, notably concerning gender, nature, and technological domination. This paper analyses how Klara, an Artificial Friend (AF), represents the convergence of posthumanist and ecofeminist discourses, framing AI as the "New Other"—a marginalised entity whose existence reflects past patterns of oppression faced by both women and environment. This research examines the commodification of Klara within capitalist and patriarchal frameworks to elucidate how Ishiguro critiques modern concerns regarding artificial intelligence, gendered employment, and environmental exploitation. This study examines how Klara contests human exceptionalism within a posthumanist framework, while yet being restricted by limits imposed by humans. Klara's heightened awareness of her environment and her distinct experience of the Sun as a vital force exemplify a divergent manner of existence, one that departs beyond anthropocentric reasoning. Her relationship with the Sun, perceived as a beneficent and healing force, corresponds with ecofeminist concepts of nature as a loving yet exploited reality. The Sun, symbolising life and renewal, highlights Klara's profound ecological awareness and her efforts to reconcile human aspirations with environmental truths. This research examines whether Klara's veneration of the Sun signifies a departure from mechanical interpretations of AI or only reinforces AI's subordination within a larger framework of control.

This study analyses the gendered coding of Klara, contending that her designated position as a carer to Josie exemplifies a wider historical context of feminised employment, in which women—and now AI—are anticipated to undertake unpaid, emotional, and domestic tasks. The narrative situates Klara inside a historical framework of servitude, prompting essential enquiries of autonomy, consent, and the moral treatment of artificial entities. Klara's experiences, viewed through an ecofeminist perspective, mirror those of women and environment, both of which have been historically objectified, instrumentalised, and commodified for the advantage of capitalist and patriarchal agendas. Ishiguro's portrayal of Klara as an intelligent and empathic being contradicts conventional AI tales that focus on either technological supremacy or subservience. The story complicates AI's function by depicting Klara as a creature with profound emotional and ethical awareness, while simultaneously constrained by systemic control mechanisms. The impact of capitalism on artificial intelligence and environmental deterioration is another essential aspect of this research. Klara's monetisation as an artificial friend underscores the pervasive consumerist society that aims to exploit technology innovations for profit, neglecting ethical implications. Ishiguro questions the integration of AI within a class-stratified society, wherein access to advanced technology is dictated by economic status. Klara's destiny as an outmoded device, cast aside when deemed unserviceable, mirrors the expendable character of labour and environmental resources under late capitalism. This paper examines how Ishiguro's depiction of Klara embodies concerns over the future of AI in a profit-oriented society and if AI can finally transcend these cycles of exploitation, it explores, if Klara, as an AI creature, may surpass her designated job or if she remains restricted by the expectations set by human society.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 8

Bratati Barik

### Multiplicity of Apocalypse: A Perspective on Posthuman Studies

The objective of the paper is to find how Apocalyptic, dystopic and futuristic trends feature in multiple and multifaceted ways in the selected speculative fictions under consideration. The present research paper has probed deeper into the understanding of the Apocalypse and the multiplicity of the Apocalyptic futuristic trends in the selected speculative fictions from the perspective of Posthuman studies. In keeping with a stark contrast to the traditional view of apocalypse that often presents a single, inevitable cataclysmic event leading to the end of the world, the idea of multiplicity of the Apocalypse has been given prominence in the sense of a series of potential catastrophes and transformations that can manifest in multiple ways. Multiplicity of the Apocalypse has been applied to various scenarios including Climate Change, Technological Advancements, Geopolitical issues, Social conflicts and Political crises. A study has been carried out from the perspective of Posthumanism to find the futuristic trends beyond traditional humanism as depicted in the selected piece of literary works. The study in the Posthumanist perspective found the challenges brought to anthropocentric views and explored the interconnectedness of humans, non-humans and technology. The study focused on multiple fields including science fiction, futurology, contemporary art and philosophy; and addressed questions relating to justice, social systems, ethics, language, blurring of boundaries and restraints among different polarities like natural and artificial, organic and inorganic, technology and potential natural way outs. In the study of the speculative fictions, the theoretical framework of Posthumanism has been found to move beyond traditional humanistic assumptions like considering human beings as rational and autonomous individuals where the human beings are the sole focus of attention. The study revealed that Posthumanism intersected with ecological consciousness and environmentalism, questioning the role of human beings in shaping the future predicament of the planet and pleading for more interconnectedness in the views of life.

The selected literary texts include Margaret Atwood's futuristic dystopian novel named *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Ray Bradbury's dystopian science fiction called *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and Vandana Singh's short story "The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet" (2008). A random sampling technique was followed. A qualitative data collection method based on intensive reading and critical analysis has been followed where the analysis was based on primary sources.



# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 8

Tuğba Aygan

### All Animals Are Equal but Human Animals Are 'More Equal' in the Anthro-po-Scene: Precarious Lives in Stef Smith's *Human Animals*

A fresh voice in contemporary British theatre, Stef Smith brings humanity's incremental progress towards an ecological disaster on stage through her powerfully alarmist Royal Court debut play *Human Animals* (2016). The play imagines a dystopian city wrestling with animal infestation. Due to large numbers of foxes, pigeons, and mice; roads are closed, parks are burned, and curfews are imposed. Authorities promise citizens a better future with a drastic solution: killing off all animals. However, following mass shootings and burnings of the animals, those who protest against burning of the parks and those who keep or hide animals also get their share from the vehemence pervading the whole city.

Borrowing Una Chaudri's term 'Anthro-po-Scene' which denotes the staging of plays concerning ecological disasters arising from massive human impact on the planet, this paper discusses how human's hostility towards and dissociation from nonhuman agents and their catastrophic consequences are reflected on contemporary British theatre, and intends to examine one such play as exemplary of antro-po-scene. By spotlighting the fine line between animals and humans, the study also probes the necessity of posthuman ethics that encourage people to expand the circle of their moral concerns and think outside the interests of their own species while highlighting the urgency for rethinking the reciprocal relationship between the human and the nonhuman anew, through Smith's *Human Animals*.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 9

Imad Adjabi

### Beyond the Self: Weird Essentialism and Ecological Entanglement in Speculative Narratives

In the vanguard of speculative fiction, Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, alongside N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*, stand as monumental works that engage with the concept of the weird as an essential narrative force. This paper argues that the protagonists' experiences and their cataclysmic environmental backdrops are intrinsically tied to the hyperobjects theorized by Timothy Morton—particularly global warming and climate disruption, despite Morton's resistance to the latter term. These hyperobjects, omnipresent yet intangible, do more than serve as thematic elements; they fundamentally reshape the structure and logic of these narratives. Lauren Olamina's hyperempathy in Butler's work dismantles the notion of individualism, reflecting an inescapable collective interconnection, while the seismic upheavals in Jemisin's *Earth* challenge the perception of a stable environment, instead presenting a planet with its own agency. This paper contends that the 'weirdness' embedded in these texts is not merely a stylistic choice but a crucial mechanism for interrogating identity and ecological crisis. By intertwining character development with broader environmental forces, Butler's and Jemisin's novels emerge as urgent examinations of our contemporary socio-ecological moment. Finally, this study positions Jemisin's speculative fiction as both an extension and a radical reimagining of Butler's feminist dystopian themes, underscoring her transformative contributions to feminist science fiction.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 9

Aparajita Nanda

### From Symbiosis to Symbiogenesis: Trans-Species Alliances in Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood*

Posthumanism in the works of Octavia Butler challenges the sacrosanct ideal of human exceptionalism. For Butler posthumanism, as Pramod K. Nayar puts it, is a "politico-philosophical discourse that sees human abilities evolving in conjunction with other life forms". Cross species encounters and resultant hybridity form the foundation of Butler's science fiction trilogy, *Lilith's Brood*. The first book, *Dawn*, opens in a nuclear war-torn world where gene trading aliens, the Oankali, promise to save the handful of human survivors provided they reproduce with the Oankali. They justify their intent, which may seem oppressive to some, by citing that humans had brought on their own ruin by way of their hierarchical tendency and the resultant war. The Oankali nominate a black woman, Lilith Iyapo, to use her as a liaison between the aliens and the humans to successfully complete their agenda. The second book, *Adulthood Rites*, focuses on the experiences of Lilith's human-Oankali son, Akin, as he at one point becomes the spokesperson of the humans who, intent on sustaining their genetic purity, refuse to conform with the Oankali agenda. The third novel, *Imago*, concerns Lilith's human-Oankali child, Jodahs, the first construct ooloi to be born. Ooloi are neuter-gender in the three-gendered Oankali species. In any reproduction the ooloi are controlling agents who manipulate the genetic makeup of any offspring. Jodahs becomes a construct Human-Oankali ooloi by default, defined by his relationship with another ooloi, Nikanj. Jodah's birth, therefore, is a milestone in the trans-species alliance. Titled "From Symbiosis to Symbiogenesis" this paper reads the relationship between Lilith, a human female and Nikanj, an ooloi as a symbiotic connection in Butler's posthuman inter-species trajectory. As the narrative moves from Lilith to Jodahs we see this symbiotic liaison evolve into what Lynn Margulis in *Symbiotic Planet* calls symbiogenesis, where "a new feature can be recognized as a product of that symbiosis." Jodahs is that "new" product of the symbiotic relationship between humans and the Oankali species, a beginning of symbiogenesis. With a multidisciplinary approach, initially, to lay the groundwork, this presentation draws on N. Katherine Hayles and her dismantling of the liberal humanist subject in the arena of cybernetics and the emergence of the posthuman. Further on, the Butlerian posthuman, that is crucially about interspecies breeding and the evolutionary potential of such a liaison, makes use of critical theories propounded by Donna Haraway, Deleuze and Guattari, Lynn Margulis, Sherryl Vint and Marquis Bey to track and decipher trans-species alliances, so necessary as we "get ready for the present" a present replete with calls for White supremacy, indiscriminate brutalization of minorities and immigrants; in short, to quote Paul Virilio, deal with "a culture of the imminence of disaster."

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 9

Ángela Rivera-Izquierdo

### Entangled Becomings: Weirdness and the Reconfiguration of Masculinities in Contemporary Fiction in English

Hegemonic masculinity—historically characterised by domination over nature and other humans—is increasingly viewed as incompatible with the demands of environmental stewardship. Brandt and Cenamor (2019: vii) contend that this form of masculinity, rooted in environmental exploitation and imperial expansion, struggles to reconcile with contemporary ecological imperatives. In response, Hultman and Pulé (e.g., 2018) propose ecological masculinities or “ecomasculinities” as a framework to redress the limitations of the traditional male-dominator model. They argue that masculinities can evolve by embracing care, empathy, and interdependence, thereby offering a model that is both adaptive and ecologically attuned.

This paper interrogates the destabilisation of masculinities and conventional gender constructs within the context of an escalating ecological crisis. Grounded in an analysis of contemporary anglophone literature that spans genres such as magical realism, folklore, and science fiction, it examines narratives that reimagine subjectivity in the wake of environmental ruin. It contends that texts within the new weird and Anthropocene fiction genres foreground a reconceptualisation of human identity as porous and interwoven with non-human agency, aligning with Alaimo’s (2010) notion of trans-corporeality and theoretical propositions by new materialist and posthuman feminist scholars.

The literature under review employs natural agents—mosses, fungi, and ruderal plants—as metaphors for ecological resilience and transformative potential. Drawing on the application of the concept of ruderality to the analysis of fiction (Castro, 2023; Schoene, 2024), these texts present non-human organisms as embodiments of liminality and in-betweenness. They occupy a position of ambiguity, resisting categorisation and thereby offering a compelling challenge to human ontoepistemology and conventional narratives of identity. This focus not only illustrates nature’s capacity to regenerate and adapt despite anthropogenic disturbances but also serves as a metaphor for resilient, non-binary modes of being. In several narratives, the monstrous quality of these interstitial organisms is imprinted upon human characters, producing hybrids or symbiotes. The destabilisation of hierarchical separations between humans and the natural world opens pathways for reimagining fluid and interdependent identities in the Anthropocene. By positing agency as fundamentally relational, contemporary fiction underscores that both human and non-human actors engage in processes of continual becoming. This challenges established boundaries between the human and the more-than-human and, by extension, destabilises static or essentialist conceptions of gender, proposing a form of postgenderism wherein traditional binary structures are dismantled.

The paper aims to contribute to contemporary scholarly discourse by demonstrating that literary hybrids articulate an increasing convergence between the human and more-than-human and propose an evolving understanding of gender and masculinities. Through the collapse of rigid gender binaries and the embrace of relational modes of subjectivity, these literary interventions advocate for a future (or present) in which gender is not a fixed determinant of power but rather a dynamic, interdependent process. They reflect the complex interplay between human existence and the broader, transformative forces of nature, inviting a reimagining of masculinity that is both responsive to and constitutive of the ecological and cultural transformations underway.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 10

Asuka Ozumi

### Girls in Dystopia: Suzuki Izumi and Torikai Akane

This contribution examines how dystopian imaginaries created by two Japanese female authors – Suzuki Izumi and Torikai Akane – interrogate reproductive politics, gender-based violence, and the boundaries of desire. Despite the forty-year gap between their works and their use of different media (literature and manga), both envision matriarchal futures where men are segregated and reproduction is tightly controlled. By comparing Suzuki's short story *Onna to onna no sekai* (*A World of Women*, 1977) and Torikai's manga *Mandarin Gipsycat's Barricade* (2017), it will explore how speculative fiction reflects persistent anxieties surrounding gender and power in Japanese society.

Suzuki Izumi, often regarded as the first female Japanese science fiction writer, was largely forgotten after her tragic death in 1986, until critic Ōmori Nozomi re-evaluated her literary significance. The recent English translations of her stories by Verso Books have ignited international interest in her work. Her science fiction, produced between the late 1970s and early 1980s, deals with themes such as the decay of the female body, gender identity, racism, drug addiction, overpopulation, euthanasia, and social alienation.

*A World of Women*, chosen as the opening piece of the anthology *Terminal Boredom*, presents a world governed by women after the downfall of a male-dominated, ecologically devastated society. Men are confined to concentration camps and retained solely for procreation, while women engage in lesbian relationships. The matriarchal system is presented as a reactionary structure marked by control and surveillance.

Torikai Akane, one of the most interesting female voices in contemporary manga, is known for controversial topics. Her most famous work, *Sensei's Pious Lie*, addresses gender-based violence and rape culture, while her recent manga *Bad Babies Don't Cry* openly engages with debates on reproductive rights in present-day Japan. Though her storytelling is usually deeply rooted into reality, *Mandarin Gipsycat's Barricade* marks a rare turn toward speculative fiction. Set in an undefined time and place, the narrative features a female-controlled society where men are few and exploited for reproductive purposes.

Despite their different genres and historical contexts, Suzuki and Torikai construct dystopian worlds that share common tropes in the SF literature: the medicalization of reproduction, the restriction of individual freedom, and the use of confinement. They also share adolescent female protagonists involved in same-sex relationships that evoke the aesthetics of yuri manga and shōjo culture, while still maintaining heterosexual love as a central narrative tension.

In an era where novelist like Murata Sayaka and Ono Miyuki and mangaka like Hagio Moto and Shirai Yumiko have received growing academic attention (Specchio, Harada, Iida) for their dystopian treatments of gender and reproduction, this work seeks to highlight Torikai's contribution as both an artist and a public persona through a comparative reading of her work alongside Suzuki's early feminist science fiction.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

Engaging with the World and the Planet in Contemporary Dystopian and Speculative Narratives

## Panel 10

Daniela Raspollini

### Tear Apart Our Future: The Commodification of Human Bodies in Contemporary Speculative Literature

This study examines the commodification of human bodies as depicted in three works of contemporary speculative fiction: Murata Sayaka's *Life Ceremony*, Agustina Bazterrica's *Tender is the Flesh*, and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. The analysis uses a critical framework that combines ecocritical, posthumanist, and biopolitical perspectives. These texts function as intellectual tools, acting as magnifying glasses that reveal the social, political, ethical, and environmental challenges of our time.

At the core of this inquiry is the idea that speculative narratives, through their allegorical and metaphorical language, act as creative laboratories where the processes of dehumanization and systematic exploitation become visible. Rather than simply predicting dystopian futures, these works engage with present realities by exposing the profound influence of biopower and capitalist logic, which reduce human bodies to mere commodities. This reduction forces a reconsideration of the ethical and ontological foundations of modern society, especially in an era marked by rapid technological and ecological changes.

Adopting a posthumanist approach, the study questions traditional binary oppositions—human versus non-human, subject versus object, and individual versus collective—that have long shaped Western ideas about identity and agency. In doing so, it demonstrates how these narratives challenge human-centred hierarchies and destabilize established cultural norms. They also highlight the growing impact of scientific and technological advancements in redefining what it means to be human, urging us to rethink the complex relationships among biology, technology, and power in today's world. From an ecocritical standpoint, the commodification of human flesh is placed within broader discussions about environmental degradation and the unsustainable use of resources. The fictional worlds presented in these texts mirror the real threats of ecological collapse and the economic inequalities inherent in contemporary capitalist systems. By depicting life as something that can be measured in financial terms, these narratives offer a strong critique of modern society's tendency to prioritize profit over ethical considerations. They invite readers to reflect on the environmental costs of industrial and technological progress and to recognize the urgent need for sustainable practices and improved environmental stewardship.

Moreover, to truly address the risks of the Anthropocene, the study emphasizes the need to consider the lives of future generations—beyond the current boundaries of the human species. It suggests that by imagining ourselves as “time acrobats”, a concept inspired by Carla Benedetti (2021) quoting Günther Anders, we can begin to overcome the natural resistance to thinking far ahead. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how speculative fiction not only critiques existing power structures but also offers transformative insights into the challenges of contemporary life.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 10

Evangeline Scarpulla

### Ecofeminist Imaginings in Novels by Yoko Tawada and Luiza Sauma: Climate Crisis, Migration, and Resistance on Earth and Beyond

This paper explores ecofeminist themes in Japanese-German author Yoko Tawada's *Scattered All Over the Earth* (2018) and Brazilian-British author Luiza Sauma's *Everything You Ever Wanted* (2019). Considering both authors' cultural and linguistic origins and their experiences of migration and transnationalism, this comparative reading uniquely highlights recent developments in speculative, dystopian and (post)apocalyptic genres within the Japanese and Latin American contexts. Through a method of close-reading, this paper will discuss how these works use speculative strategies – such as posing a 'what-if' question, imagining potential futures, and creating ambiguous endings – to engage with topics of climate-changed futures and the human-environment relationship.

In *Scattered All Over the Earth*, Tawada imagines a post-apocalyptic world in which Japan has been destroyed by climate change. The protagonist, Hiruko, embarks on a journey across Northern Europe in search of the remnants of her lost culture. Through this cross-border journey, Tawada emphasises the need for transnational alliances and solidarity in the face of ecological devastation. *Everything You Ever Wanted* imagines a similarly life changing journey, but rather than travelling across borders and nations, Sauma's protagonist, Iris, travels between solar systems, reimagining the trope of space travel to explore contemporary experiences of migration, displacement, and anxiety. The novel implicitly critiques the neo-imperial and capitalist-driven exploitation of natural environments, suggesting that humanity's future lies not in escaping to other planets but in reimagining our relationship with Earth, its ecosystems, and each other.

Despite their distinct cultural and linguistic backgrounds, both authors share a concern for the environmental and political future of our world and envision forms of resistance to these challenges. The subtlety of their speculative world-building blurs the line between current realities and possible dystopian futures, inviting us to recognize that the problems facing their characters, such as ecological collapse and exploitation, misinformation, patriarchal systems of power, and social injustice, mirror the crises of our time. By conducting a comparative analysis of these two novels, this paper aims to further the conversation on alternative epistemologies, and transnational ecofeminist perspectives in contemporary dystopian and speculative fiction, ultimately asking whether current trends in speculative feminist literature impart a sense of hope or trepidation regarding the future of our planet.



# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 10

Natalie Israyy

### Parasite as a Technique: Beyond the Metaphoric and Representative Literature

Considering the novel *Peregrino transparente* (2023) written by Juan Cárdenas, it is possible to analyse different types of problems given by the traditional readings of a metaphorical and representational nature used to designate parasites, and how in contemporary stories of the weird subgenre, parasites and parasitism are reconceptualized and gain agency to let them speak for themselves, making fictionalization a mode of existence. In literary studies, new narratives and poetry demand new forms of reading, especially when productions show challenging structures and different layers of comprehension.

Some literary texts are constructed in layers, presenting concerns about the present and reformulating the past. This happens in Speculative fiction, a subgenre in which the notion of fantastical works is a mode rather than a genre. Considering this, I present a figure that is interesting not only because it creates a great impression with its existence but also because it undergoes changes in many stages. The parasite is a figure that scares because it is associated with diseases or viewed as a threat; nevertheless, the parasite is not only something dangerous; on the contrary, it is an entity that renews each system where it is a guest (Serres). I take the concept of contamination to a profound level in the variations of parasitic behaviour in Latin American narrations: their conduct is not only biological but also linguistic and performative. Therefore, analyses based on metaphors or representations of parasites are not sufficient.

It is necessary to develop a discussion on the notions of metaphor and representation to determine how parasitic fictionalization surpasses them; because parasitic existence, even as a concept, is a gesture that reformulates language and poesis from which literature is born. Here I propose the idea of cross-contamination to go far from the contamination itself, mostly because I am interested in the crossings that occur between the levels and layers of each story that I will analyze, and with this, the traces left by the parasitic gesture.

It will be important to interweave theoretical and critical views with the narrative of Juan Cárdenas, where it can be anticipated that the parasitic gesture will be executed in physical and spectral modes, but also, like any act related to the parasite, it will modify each environment and, with it, amplify its outcome and agency, showing the parasitism as a technique. With the discussion and analysis of the texts, I will attempt to demonstrate how the concept of parasite is broader than representations and metaphors that are usually used to present or analyse different types of parasites and parasitism in literature. I will specifically prove in *Peregrino transparente* that parasites, as a gesture, have an agency to work through fictionalization, thinking in fiction as a mode to produce variations in the imaginary of existence.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

Engaging with the World and the Planet in Contemporary Dystopian and Speculative Narratives

## Panel 11

Madelena Mañetto Quick

### Speculative Design for More-Than-Human Worlds

Speculative design can be used to craft alternative narratives that challenge dominant assumptions about human-animal relationships. Drawing from research through design practice, I demonstrate how speculative storytelling can open imaginative spaces for more-than-human world-building. Through creative design experiments—including writing prompts, a fictional sanctuary journal, and an imagined co-design workshop—my work interrogates existing paradigms and envisions multispecies futures. By centering speculative design as a means of critical inquiry, I highlight how designers can navigate complex ethical and ecological concerns without resorting to prescriptive solutions.

Contemporary speculative and critical design offer methods for questioning the present and imagining alternative futures. Speculative design functions as a discursive practice, engaging with 'wicked problems' by generating thought-provoking scenarios rather than definitive resolutions. This conference presentation will communicate a series of speculative design interventions that investigate the ethical and relational dynamics of farmed animal worlds. It argues that speculative design provides a powerful framework for reimagining these relationships in ways that challenge anthropocentric hierarchies and open new avenues for multispecies collaboration.

The methodology I employed follows an iterative research-through-design approach, which allows researchers to rely on designed narratives as a way of approaching messy situations with unclear or even conflicting agendas. This method situates creative practice as a form of knowledge production that extends beyond theoretical critique into applied experimentation. By embracing design as a means of inquiry, this project engages in world-building exercises that seek to make space for more-than-human agency and ethical cohabitation. The creative work presented herein consists of three primary speculative design experiments: a series of narrative prompts designed to generate alternative worldviews that centre farmed animals as active participants in multispecies futures, a speculative first-person account from a farm animal sanctuary owner which blends ethnographic insight with fictional storytelling to explore ethical dilemmas and alternative models of care, and an imaginary workshop in which participants collaboratively envision new interspecies futures through world-building exercises.

This project aligns with pluriversal design approaches that emphasise relationality over universalist problem-solving. Rather than reinforcing human-centered narratives, it explores speculative techniques that foreground multispecies entanglements. Inspired by Haraway's (2016) call to "stay with the trouble," the work resists dystopian determinism in favor of hopeful, yet complex, speculative futures. Speculative design offers a compelling tool for interrogating the ethics of human-animal relations and imagining alternative ways of worlding. This presentation will contribute to ongoing discussions within design research, anthropology, and environmental humanities by demonstrating how speculative narratives can serve as both critical inquiry and creative intervention. Ultimately, the goal is to gain insight into speculative methodologies and their potential to challenge entrenched assumptions about multispecies coexistence.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 11

María del Pilar Melgarejo

### Shapeshifting in Frida Kahlo's Art

The recent appropriation of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo in popular culture represents the epitome of the entanglement between capitalism and art in the contemporary world. Her presence in popular culture has, in an unprecedented way, torn down the boundaries between folk art and art as a commodity. Her critique of the American "way of life," combined with the influence of indigenous knowledge, shaped Kahlo's artistic production. The irony is that her life and her own use of shapeshifting contribute to a dystopian narrative that makes us both spectators and participants in the artist pictorial world, while also giving us the tools to exercise resilience in confronting and navigating the challenges of the modern times. In this context, I want to explore the Mesoamerican mythology of Nahualismo, focusing on shapeshifting and the possibilities that the multiplicity of identities offers in a dystopian narrative. The idea of the plurality of self, as crucial to the construction of human identity, permeates indigenous knowledge and also allows us to reflect on our relationship with the natural world and the development of consciousness.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 11

Tomasz Dymowski

### Qudan Rie's Dystopian Narrative and Architecture of the Present in *Tokyo Sympathy Tower* (Tōkyō-to dōjōtō)

When Qudan Rie (born 1990), in 2024, won the Akutagawa prize for her novel *Tokyo Sympathy Tower* (Tōkyō-to dōjōtō), mass media picked up on her comment that 5% of her novel was written with the help of AI – chat GPT. Indeed, 'Tokyo Sympathy Tower' is a speculative fiction in which the main character – an architect called Sara Machina, uses chat GPT to ask questions about her life or job. However, this is not a novel where the focus is only on AI capabilities. Dystopia is hidden not in the AI conversations but in the reality itself where the "tower" of the title is intended to serve as a residence for criminals to whom sympathy should be felt. Like the tower of Babel, it causes conflict between people. Mainly because it relies on the structure of words which are becoming more and more cancelled in daily life, as a purpose to create more sympathy in the world. Aoki Jun, an architect, points out in his article in the April 2024 issue of *Shincho Literary* magazine that in Qudan's novel, architectural buildings are irrelevant because words are architecture – pillars, walls, parts that make up a larger whole. But, same as the Babel tower mentioned at the beginning of the novel – it is impossible to create any regular shape in reality that has already been shredded into pieces. 'Tokyo Sympathy Tower', however dystopian, deals with an important issue, that is being a woman in contemporary society. Cyborg-like Sara Machina, with her life-changing plan of building a Sympathy Tower in Tokyo, or Zaha Hadid and Olympic stadium that exists in the novel, serve as forms of empowerment.

In my presentation, I would like to answer the questions of how the author describes the dystopian present, communication problems and misunderstandings on the one hand, and how she portrays femininity and its role in the modern world.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

Engaging with the World and the Planet in Contemporary Dystopian and Speculative Narratives

## Panel 12

Aba-Carina Parlog

### The Unhinged Reality: 'Lifted' Children, Artificial Friends and Digital Surrogates

Kazuo Ishiguro's speculative narrative *Klara and the Sun* shows us how an exaggerated attempt to make human beings resilient in the face of biological attacks (see the "lifted" children in the novel) creates a hybrid world where discrimination is encouraged based on one's health or finances. Sick children (such as Jodie) are regarded in a critical way for spending most of their time at home and being schooled by private tutors, while brilliant children (such as Rick) are looked down upon for not having been genetically prepared because of money lack. They are kept away from their peers who have undergone special treatment so that they may become worthy members of the advanced society.

Harmony and balance are neglected despite the basically human solutions that the characters look for in the book (i.e. finding a friend to lift their spirits or trying to have the loved ones around for a long time) as digital surrogates represent the chosen answer to their problems. Whenever the digital comes into play, one can notice the tendency to greatly exaggerate and its quite troubling effects upon human beings. The main problem which virtual or unreal/ fake life determines is that of health whether it appears sooner or later in the characters' path.

The corruptive effects of accepting technology and its fancy surrogates as solutions for human beings' psychological needs determine subversive transformations at the level of the human psychic as the surrogates lack the very thing that humans yearn for, which is affectionate support, kindness and empathy. However, digital friends or surrogates (interacting quite like human beings) allow for destructive behaviour patterns which are hard to break. The risk is that of human characters' behaving around other human beings in a similar heartless, ungrateful and aggressive/ violent way which they use with digital surrogates or objects. Consequently, human beings themselves may be identified with disposable objects that can be replaced or modified, as other human beings wish, which may create a hostile society where people have highly dysfunctional and strained relationships.

The presence of post-humanism is acknowledged through the creation of artificial or digital clones of the loved ones for the purpose of virtually prolonging the latter's existence on earth. To this end, Chrissie (Jodie's mother) discusses a similar project which centres on Klara (Jodie's AF) that is to turn into her daughter after her demise. The interplay between natural, balanced and common life (suggested by the sun, the wheat fields and affectionate exchanges between people) and artificial, mechanised or electronic life (suggested by the presence of electronic devices, artificial friends and machinery) allows the reader to view a sick world despite its pretences, a world which aspires to become superior by subversively solving man's physical and psychic health problems.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

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## Panel 12

Despoina Tantsiopoulou

### Educated Clones: Dystopic Education as Trauma in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

In his 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro creates a school, Hailsham. In a reimagined England of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, cloning has become a commonplace healthcare method to treat the organ transplant needs of the human population after the end of WWII, entirely eliminating formerly life-threatening diseases like cancer, which would qualify Ishiguro's world as a shining utopia. Yet, in the majority of its analyses the novel is categorized as the complete opposite, a melancholy dystopia where living creatures are sacrificed in the name of a greater good they are no part of, undergoing a series of mandatory organ harvesting procedures ironically called "donations." The diametrical opposition of the two approaches can be attributed to the point of view of the novel: Kathy H., the protagonist and first-person narrator of the novel, is a clone raised in Ishiguro's fictional school and her narration is mostly reminiscence on her childhood in it, juxtaposed with her later life as a "carer" and a future donor. Throughout the novel, she obsessively returns to her days in Hailsham, identifying it as the source of her present woes, searching it both mentally, by revisiting her childhood memories, and physically, as she drives around the English countryside from one hospital to the other. Hailsham, then, as I argue, is transformed into a physical manifestation of trauma, the time twisting institution that marks its alumni so deeply that they are drawn to its bosoms long after their graduation. In his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud demonstrates how the traumatized individual develops a compulsion to repeat the events of their trauma until they are satisfactorily resolved, and I see Kathy's attempts to reenter her academic womb, the only parental figure she has ever known since she, like all her fellow clones, lacks biological parents, as her own way to manipulate time to her advantage, to retrace her steps into the world that is about to drain her life in order to claim some of her past for her own, to regain agency in a world she can hardly control. Ishiguro's hailing from the city of Nagasaki, the place of the second atomic bombing in August 1945, underlines the themes of bodily autonomy and precaution towards scientific experimentation, echoing the hibakusha – the atomic bomb survivors' – accounts. I read Hailsham as an institution that systematically creates individuals meant for slaughter, doubling the cloning process responsible for their existence by generating individuals identical in ideas and thoughts through education. I will try to demonstrate that an education based on humanistic subjects can entrap rather than liberate its students when used with the aim of producing docile bodies, as Michel Foucault argues in his *Discipline and Punish*. Somatic and psychic trauma are manifested in the image of Hailsham, that ensnares the protagonist in her past with no promise of a future, and weaponizes education to support the devious intents of those in power.

I have a BA from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens on English Language and Literature with a specialization on Literature and Culture. I hold an MA from the same department, titled "The Greek Element in Anglophone Literature," with a dissertation on modern rewritings of Euripides's *Bacchae*. This year I started my PhD in the English Language and Literature department of the University of Athens, where I research the role of the university and boarding school campus in fantasy and science fiction. I live in Athens and I am a member of the Open School for Migrants on Piraeus.

# GETTING READY FOR THE PRESENT

Engaging with the World and the Planet in Contemporary Dystopian and Speculative Narratives

## Panel 12

Maria-Ana Tupan

### Suppressing the Past, Undoing the Self

In the 1930s it was still an easy task for Ayn Rand, the author of *Anthem*, a dystopic novella, to assess the value of authentic reconstruction of the past in light of ethical objectivism which capitalizes on reason, purpose and the self. The World Council forbidding memory of the past or inventions for the future in *Anthem*, the archiving mechanism in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the sacking of libraries and the interdiction of writing, in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, unified thematically books which appeared at about the same time raising the alarm about the most dreaded apocalypse facing humanity: the death of the human subject through loss of memory and access to the symbolic order. .

In all these books, there is a self-conscious resistance, an attempted opposition to the totalitarian power which still secures a moral centre in the fictional universe.

Contrariwise, the fiction published from the 1960s to the present is no longer tributary to the ethical heritage of objectivism. Its values have become meaningless in the age of the deconstruction of reason, of posthistory, hyperreality or loss of the signs of identity, both in the individual and the collective self.

The horrors of the second world conflagration lingered in memory as sites too traumatic for attempting healing or even understanding. Oblivion seemed to be an easier solution than dealing with the scars of memory ("How It Was When the Past Went Away" by Robert Silverberg). Forgetting the past in order to put an end to the cycle of violence offered itself as a tempting solution (Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*), while Yōko Ogawa (*The Memory Police*) imagined an apocalypse with the world disappearing concomitantly with the subject of speaking or inscription. The island is the megametaphor of a heavily troped narrative. Contemporary man is becoming islandish, solipsistic. The islanders in the book experience the loss of the map to navigate the world, as things and the words naming them keep disappearing. The community undergoes entropy as the objects of interpersonal exchanges in society are those that build bridges and strengthen the bonds among humans reinforcing shared cultural values and norms.

The dystopian narratives of the contemporary come close to what Laurence J. Kirmayer calls "Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative and Dissociation"\* . Versions of totalitarianism, political or technological, haunted the latter half of the twentieth century, while modern means of digital control have turned a concept – Lacan's Law of the Father – into a palpable reality. The individual lives with a sense of being permanently under surveillance and limited in respect to "what is socially possible to speak of and what must remain hidden and unacknowledged." (191). The waning of affect has reached a level of detachment from reality which may very well hide a defence mechanism triggered by the growing complexities of living "in the ashes of history."\*\*

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\* L.J. Kirmayer, "Landscapes of memory: Trauma, Narrative and Dissociation". In P. Antze & M. Lambek (Eds.), *Tense Past: Cultural Essays on Memory and Trauma* (pp. 173–198). (Routledge, 1996)

\*\*Cathy Caruth, *Cathy. Literature in the Ashes of History* (Hopkins, 2013)