



Conference Report: Finncon 2022 Academic Track

Hope and Resilience
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Aalto University, Espoo, Finland

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It was a typical summer weekend, in July of 2022, when a multitude of authors, fans, cosplayers, and academics gathered at the campus of Aalto university in Espoo, Finland, to discuss and celebrate speculative genres of fiction. Finncon, Finland's largest SFF convention, has taken place almost every year since 1986. The convention of 2020 was held virtually due to the Covid-19 pandemic, whereas in 2021, the event was canceled outright. Finncon 2022's Academic Track was, for many, the first in-person conference in years. Attendance was very high; the room was full during many of the sessions. Much of the programming in the fan convention side of the affair was at capacity, which led to many regular fans coming to enjoy the engaging papers presented in the Academic Track.

The conference presenters hailed from across the planet, and their papers approached the theme of the event, "Hope and Resilience", from a notably wide variety of perspectives. Extrapolating from many of the presentations, it was clear that the seemingly optimistic theme implied another, less cheerful undertone. This conference was not just about hope and resilience; it was about hope and resilience in dark times. In retrospect, this addendum may have been inevitable. As many of the presentations convincingly argued, hope and resilience do not exist independently, but rather in opposition to something that must be endured. They are forces that arise to counteract desperation and ruin. They are the hobbits of our nature: when darkness threatens, hope and resilience set out on a seemingly impossible quest to deliver

us from everything that is sad and bad – “a fool’s hope”, as Elise Kraatila put it in her presentation.

The theme seemed to resonate with the attendees, perhaps because of that inescapable sense that we do, in fact, live in a dark time, one of cultural, geopolitical, and environmental distress – a time, it is often lamented, in which truth has no meaning and in which meaning can never be truthful. According to many of the presentations, living in such a time is one of the reasons, if not *the* reason, for the suffusion of speculative fiction into mainstream culture, the evaporation of genres as Gary K. Wolfe once famously put it (2011, 50).¹ Models for imagining futures, for navigating uncertainty and for finding hope are needed in what appears a hopeless time. Speculative fiction can, perhaps, act as a source and method for some of those models: a means of manufacturing hope.

The keynote lecture by the convention’s academic guest of honor, Malka Older, was very much on trend in its approach to this theme of speculation in the times of distress.² It focused on the relationship between hope and uncertainty, as well as on the potential impact of SFF in the contemporary society. According to Older, hope cannot exist without uncertainty: lack of hope necessitates a belief that there is no uncertainty. If there is uncertainty, things can change for the better. While uncertainty can lead to hope, it can also lead to worry and anxiety. One way to shift from that worry towards actionable hope, to better prepare in the face of uncertainty, is to imagine futures. Modeling futures may give us a semblance of control, of knowing the parameters. And so, we imagine futures, some of which are patently fictitious, and some of which seem like they are not.

Older asked the audience to consider how differently everyday predictions and SFF predictions are approached. We often weave the future into our lives effortlessly, without a thought. A weather forecast that promises rain with 52% certainty is interpreted at face value as a non-fictional model of the future, as are cost-benefit analyses. Some of these seemingly non-fictional models of the future are taken very seriously by very serious people: they are allowed to influence the actions of individuals, corporations, and nation states, often drastically. These are mundane predictions of the future. They usually involve numbers and deal with demographic groups rather than individuals. They are easily interpreted as being less fictional than predictions that focus more on particulars. We have been culturally trained to think of abstract and quantifiable models as scientific and objective. SFF lets us imagine the immeasurable, to key into future dimensions that are not so easily quantifiable, such as individual stories and experiences. These “softer”, more particular predictions are important for developing a workable understanding of the future – perhaps even more important than the quantifiable ones. In contrast to non-fictional future predictions, the models SFF can provide us are easy to see as just that: as models, as singular possibilities among countless others, rather than as representations of “one true” inescapable, inevitable future.

However, there is still a danger in placing too much faith in these softer predictions. Older described this danger as a “narrative disorder”, a condition in which the narrative model of understanding the world starts taking over the

¹ Wolfe, Gary K. *Evaporating Genres: Essays on Fantastic Literature*. Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

² See also Malka Older’s prefatory in this issue.

mind, holding more weight than reality. Based on studies and real-world experience, we know, for example, that when disaster strikes, people do not usually run around aimlessly, screaming in panic. Regardless of that knowledge, we tend to believe they do. This false belief arises from a mental model of disaster, which in turn is based on generic fictive representations in movies and other popular narrative media. In her keynote, Older advocated for “evidence-based creativity” as a safeguard against some of the dangers inherent in the narrative form. In the post-truth era, this cautioning seems necessary, especially when advocating for models of knowledge that are fundamentally based on affect and compelling stories. However, distinguishing between those imaginings of the future that are evidence-based and those that are not, remains an exceptionally difficult task. What tools does a layperson, or an expert for that matter, have for identifying that crucial difference, for untangling evidence-based fictions from those that merely appear as such?

Before returning to discussing the conference as a whole, I would like to highlight the exceptionally high-quality audience questions that followed the keynote lecture. Many experts in the audience offered thought-provoking comments and novel perspectives. This led to a fascinating, productive discussion. Audiences were very engaged in the regular academic sessions as well, but considering that the keynote took place in a large lecture hall, this level of in-depth interaction was downright impressive. This level of interaction and engagement highlights the strength and sense of community that often exists around SFF. Fandom spaces are known for this sense of community, which can extend, perhaps surprisingly, to the academic sphere as well.

There was a sizable Chinese contingent attending the conference, which laid the perfect groundwork for a fascinating discussion on the changing stories in Chinese SFF. Yue Zhou’s talk about Liu Cixin’s ecological stories touched on the importance of colonizing and exploring Mars in Chinese science fiction, which was particularly interesting. One of the most comforting lessons of the whole academic track to me personally was revealed in these discussions: if we were to colonize Mars, scholars of literature would definitely still be needed there.

There were excellent presentations in multiple panels that centered on contemporary uses of dystopian and, perhaps more prevalently, utopian modes of thinking, acting, and representation. I found that Paul Graham Raven’s presentation, titled “Utopias in the Making: Speculation as Co-Production, and a Praxis of Hope”, stood out as a particularly electrifying talk in the context of the event. This might have something to do with how practical the viewpoint was, and how different from the literary analyses that are the bread and butter of conferences like this. Raven’s work on making big ideas accessible to ordinary people appeared to be an exemplary case of Older’s evidence-based creativity. Performances like *The Museum of Carbon Ruins*, which estrange everyday objects, certainly seem to have a heart fueled by pure essence of SFF beating inside them.

The concept of resilience was also discussed by some, including docent Merja Polvinen, whose paper on Susanna Clarke’s latest novel *Piranesi* (2021) concluded the academic program in style. However, as Polvinen pointed out, it was the discourse of hope that attracted the most of attention in the majority of presentations featured in the Academic Track. While resilience was clearly a valuable addition to the theme of the conference, it was overshadowed by hope

this time around. Perhaps there is a drive to overcome, not merely to persevere. Yet, it seems to me that resilience, too, should be construed as a type of heroism.

Biography: Markus Laukkanen, M.A., is a doctoral researcher at Tampere University. He is currently working on his PhD thesis on changing communicative structures of internet age narratives. Laukkanen is the coordinator for Narrare: Centre for Interdisciplinary Narrative Studies at Tampere University. His research interests include online narratives, social media studies, reader-theories, interactive fiction, genre theory, depictions of climate change in contemporary fiction and poetics of post-postmodernism.