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day. Many also stayed on well into the evening as the conference moved on for the customary social in town. There were still over a dozen people left in the pub when I left at 9 pm, and it is testament to the growing Fantastika community that so many people were so keen to stay for just as long as they could to make the most of the opportunity. Many thanks go to the conference organizers, the keynotes, chairs and speakers, and all the many delegates who helped make the conference such a wonderful success.

**Sublime Cognition: Science Fiction and Metaphysics, Birkbeck College  
London, 14–15 September 2018**

Reviewed by Paul March-Russell (University of Kent)

Following their previous year's success (see *Foundation* 128), the organizers of the London Science Fiction Research Community (LSFRC) expanded their second conference to two days, still reasonably priced at just £16. As before, the theme of the conference followed on from their year-long reading group. Co-organizer Francis Gene-Rowe emphasized in his introduction that the theme was deliberately chosen to both contest and expand upon Darko Suvin's notion of cognitive estrangement by reinvesting his otherwise materialistic framework with the concept of sublimity. First theorized by the classical philosopher Longinus, and subsequently reclaimed by Edmund Burke in the 1750s at the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the sublime has always been positioned at the point where rational cognition ends and feelings of the ineffable and the numinous take over. As Roger Luckhurst summarized in his opening keynote, Immanuel Kant considerably muddied the waters by arguing that such feelings could result in an enlightened reason, thereby restoring the sublime to the realm of cognition. However, in linking sublimity with metaphysics, the conference organizers sought to go beyond such an accommodation.

This linkage tended to skew the conference towards themes of religion and spirituality rather than more aesthetic understandings of the sublime. Provocatively, the conference reclaimed metaphysics as, according to Aristotle, the first priority of philosophy; a hierarchy that a succession of twentieth-century philosophers from Emmanuel Levinas to Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard had sought to reverse by propounding ethics as first philosophy. We could think of metaphysics and ethics as twin poles upon an axis, the former tending towards transcendence ('what is the meaning of life?') and the latter towards immanence ('what life should I lead?'). If the former tends towards a totalizing, let alone totalitarian thought, as evidenced by the post-structural critique of Hegel, then the latter tends towards a kind of mysticism, as evidenced by Levinas' reliance upon Talmudic scripture to describe the relationship

between self and Other. The sublime can instead be regarded as the axial point at which these poles converge. For Lyotard, the pathos of the sublime – its inability to be fully understood – resisted the totalizing tendencies within any metaphysical system; the failure of cognition heralded the moment of the ethical encounter, the recognition of an Otherness, a radical alterity, which goes beyond understanding. Albeit oxymoronic, the notion of a ‘sublime cognition’ is useful in that it works to foreground the tension between metaphysics and ethics.

This tension was elegantly brought out by Luckhurst’s analysis of a 4½ minute sequence from Gareth Edwards’ film, *Monsters* (2010), in which the human protagonists encounter the aliens of the title. Luckhurst not only gave an acute summary of the sublime, demonstrating how this scene draws upon familiar tropes such as scale, obscurity, beauty and terror, but also contrasted it with Jeffrey Cohen’s ‘monster theory’, the popular take-up of which since its coinage in 1996 has served to accommodate notions of the sublime to an overdetermined critical formula. In resisting the post-structural ‘ethical turn’ of Derrida and others, which also underwrites Cohen’s theory, Luckhurst gave instead a historicized reading of Edwards’ film. Drawing upon his current researches into borders and corridors, Luckhurst re-read the film as an ambiguous allegory about the relationship between Mexico and the US, and in particular, the horrors described by journalist Charles Bowden in his book *Juarez: The Laboratory of Our Future* (1998). Although acknowledging the racial blindness of the film (the two white protagonists survive at the expense of their Mexican companions), Luckhurst nevertheless argued that the sublimity of his chosen sequence speaks to the unrepresentability of the atrocities that have also found popular manifestation in the fast-growing religion of Santa Muerte, the ‘Lady of the Dead’. Luckhurst’s reading, via Edwards’ film, took us beyond pathos and into the historical and ethical uncertainties of corrupt foreign policies, economic exploitation, illegal migration and mass murder.

Luckhurst’s keynote also initiated a pleasing aspect of the conference – its internationalism. Serena Volpi, for example, contrasted the cyclical time embodied within African folklore, and dramatized in Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed* (1980) and Nnedi Okorafor’s *The Book of Phoenix* (2015), with the linear time imposed by western anthropology. Tanojiri Tetsuro explored the Japanese anime, *Psycho-Pass* (2012–), through the notion of *Ki*, a mystical oneness in which all persons and things are interconnected by the flow of energy. Whereas the technological society of *Psycho-Pass* offers a profane version of *Ki* in the form of a surveillance culture, Tetsuro argued that the series counters this desecrated ideal with a mythological battle between gods and humans. Farzad Mahootian picked up this theme of gods and technology through an engaging reading of Stanislaw Lem’s *GOLEM XIV* (1973), in which he argued the super-

computer's utterly indifferent attitude towards humanity shared similarities with Neoplatonic thought to be found not only with the Western tradition but also Arabic philosophy. As another speaker emphasized, the godless transcendence of Buddhism may be most popular with sf writers, and the conference was blessed by the appearance of Llew Watkins, an artist and practising Buddhist. He gave a clear account of one of the key Buddhist texts, *The Avatamsaka Sutra*, and drew out affinities between its cosmologically entangled vision and the worlds presented in Jorge Luis Borges' 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' (1940) and M. John Harrison's *Viriconium* sequence (1971–84). Similarly, Yen Ooi drew upon the Chinese folk legend of the 'Butterfly Lovers' and, in paying attention to the Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist elements of the story, made comparisons with contemporary western sf around themes of reincarnation, transformation and transferable consciousness. Like Watkins, Ooi counselled against direct influence between these texts but argued that, due to the size and diaspora of the Chinese population, such folktales could act as unwitting templates for more obvious science-fictional stories from the west.

The most discussed author, though, was Philip K. Dick and he was the only writer to receive a panel all of his own. In addition, James Burton gave a somewhat freewheeling account of the dialectical tensions within sf, arguing that the genre's alleged emphasis upon reason can only be made by opposing – and thus restating – what it is not: the unreason of metaphysical belief. It came as no surprise that Dick's fiction supplied Burton with relevant examples. Similarly, in tentatively proposing 'a theory of sublime cognition', by drawing upon Christopher Patridge's *The Re-Enchantment of the West* (2005), Mattia Petricola used Dick's *Ubik* (1969) amongst his instances. More convincing, by being less wide-ranging, Rob Mayo (who came suitably attired in a *Prisoner* jacket) compared Dick's *Clans of the Alphane Moon* (1964) with Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* (1966) within the context of the anti-psychiatry movement. Although arguably Keyes' target was behavioural psychology rather than psychiatry *per se*, the paper opened-out the critiques of more obviously New Wave texts such as those by J.G. Ballard and Thomas M. Disch.

The second keynote was by analytical philosopher Helen de Cruz. She offered an engaging overview of how philosophy has traditionally used thought experiments to explore metaphysical questions, and the extent to which these experiments have affinities with speculative fiction. Her claim, though, that sf can be more effective by engaging the reader's emotions was less well developed since de Cruz's chosen authors – Ted Chiang, Robert Heinlein and Hud Hudson – only received perfunctory treatment towards the end of the talk. In retrospect, looking at the content of the conference, it might have been useful if a theologian had also been invited to speak. Nevertheless, de Cruz offered a

counterbalance to the Continental theory that tended to predominate.

Utopian speculations also strongly featured. Katie Stone offered a useful summary of how feminist sf has contested the gendered and biological assumptions surrounding human reproduction; her most interesting insight being the extent to which the gynoids of the recent TV adaptation of *Westworld* (2016–) replicate maternal desires. Luke Jones, meanwhile, reflected upon the utopian possibilities of glass architecture, especially as prophesied by the critic and sf writer Paul Scheerbart. Imogen Woodberry presented an alternative take on Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) by focusing on the extent to which the collectivity of Huxley's utopia was influenced by mystical ideas of group consciousness to be found in Huxley's sometime mentor, Gerald Heard, as well as Eastern religion. Tom Kewin, by contrast, argued that the techno-mysticism which occurs in Matthew De Abaitua's novels, *The Red Men* (2007) and *If Then* (2015), is subsumed by a dystopian vision of stasis and stagnation – unlike Huxley's notion of an evolutionary consciousness, there is no escape in De Abaitua from an infinite regress; an endless commodification and recirculation of the past as an empty simulacrum. Kewin's paper was complemented by Jo Lindsay Walton's analysis of the figure of The Luggage in Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels as an embodiment of commodity fetishism. Autonomous of the humans who equally disown their responsibility, The Luggage's running amok complements, Walton argued, the havoc caused by the movement of capital that defies human comprehension and financial regulation.

Amanda Pavani and Glyn Morgan both speculated upon the representation of death in sf. For Pavani, her focus was the portrayal of near-death experiences in Connie Willis' *The Passage* (2001). Drawing upon the work of visual theorists, Georges Didi-Huberman and Philippe DuBois, Pavani argued that the imagistic content of Willis' descriptions ultimately exceeds their narrative framing. This was a highly suggestive paper that could have been developed further, in terms of Romantic aesthetics, by linking the image with the ruin, itself an emblem of sublimity that disrupts the categories of past, present and future. The ruinous effect of representation was also explored by Glyn Morgan who, in concentrating upon C.S. Forester's story 'The Wandering Gentile' (1954), argued that such fictions perform a wish-fulfilment fantasy by portraying Adolf Hitler as monstrously evil, and therefore beyond rational explanation, and God as a divine punisher working on the side of the Allies. Yet, as Morgan argued, the question that occurs in such Holocaust testimonies as Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1956) is: where was God in the death camps? If God could let such atrocities happen, is He not in some sense both culpable and complicit? Such questions undermine the simplistic binary of Forester's story but also more contemporary representations of Nazism in film and superhero comics. Lastly, in an often

amusing talk, Christos Callow asked whether an actor can transcend his/her cultural and physical limitations to portray a character that is irreducibly Other? Whilst arguing for more sophisticated acting practice, Callow remained delightfully sceptical of one of the conference's main goals – the pursuit of a spiritual transcendence that, to Callow's mind, could only serve as a distraction from what it means to truly empathize with the Other.

Both days ended with a general discussion. The first used a forum-like format to reflect upon and respond to the day's content. Short position papers were offered by conference organizers Rhodri Davies and Aren Roukema, Katie Stone, and writer and editor Eli Lee. Responses were then taken from the audience using a traditional hands-up system. Most people got a chance to speak and the format was generally viewed as a success by offering a pause within the proceedings. The second day ended with a roundtable discussion, ably chaired by Jim Clarke, and featuring the writers Fiona Moore, Jeff Noon and Justina Robson. By bringing actual practice to bear upon the theorizing of the sublime, this was a superb end to the conference. Robson's passionate critique of gender relations in sf, prompted by a question from Adam Roberts on Burke's gendering of the sublime, was a stand-out moment.

Before the last day closed, Katie Stone announced next year's theme – notions of labour and reproduction in sf. Those able to, can join the LSFRC's monthly reading group (Monday evenings at Birkbeck College), whilst the rest of us can look forward to another invigorating conference in 2019.