



Call for Papers

Fantastic Beasts, Monstrous Cyborgs, Aliens and Other Spectres: Exploring Alterity in Fantasy and Science Fiction

Student Conference, English Department, University of Freiburg, 19-20 October 2018

Identity formation operates through processes of exclusion by defining the self against an other. As Sencindiver et al argue: “[O]therness has been inseparable from human identity and affairs from time immemorial – the birth of subjectivity ineluctably implicates the birth of its concomitant and allegedly dark twin”.¹ Alterity is a concept of ongoing relevance and describes “the quality of strangeness inherent in the other”.² The relationship between self and other is based on hierarchical power structures that stem from an essentialist mind-set and serve as justifications of exclusionary practices such as imperialism, sexism and anthropocentrism. With the emergence of postmodern theory in the 1960s, the validity of these hierarchies has been continually called into question. Especially the deconstruction of the divide between high and popular culture led to a pluralisation of perspectives, giving a voice to those who had formerly been excluded and silenced.

Critical theorists such as John Storey have described popular culture itself as an other that is always defined against any other definitions of “culture” and “popular”.³ It follows that popular culture constitutes a hegemonic site of struggle and thus provides productive ground on which to contrast different discourses surrounding alterity, which can in turn confirm or subvert them. Popular culture is not a mere reflection of current cultural discourses but takes an active role, influencing the various ways in which we perceive and respond to otherness.

We are currently witnessing a proliferation of the genres of science fiction and fantasy, particularly in media such as film or television (consider for example the popularity of films and series such as *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, *Game of Thrones*, the *Star Wars* sequels, recent *Star Trek* reboots & prequels and many more). The study of fantasy and science fiction is especially rewarding in the context of analysing representations of alterity. Both genres construct elaborate alternative worlds in which encounters between human characters and sentient nonhuman others call into question the nature of the human

¹ Sencindiver, Susan Yi, Marie Lauritzen and Maria Beville. “Introduction.” *Otherness: A Multilateral Perspective*, Peter Lang, 2011, p. 17 (pp. 17-42).

² Buchanan, Ian. “Alterity.” *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, Oxford UP, 2010. Online.

³ cf. Storey, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. Routledge, 2015. 7th Edition, pp. 13ff.

and, with it, the boundaries between self and other. The thought experiments that characterise fantasy and science fiction estrange our known reality which promotes an active examination of our world. They throw into relief what we consider as other and provide new models to encounter alterity outside of fiction in the 'real' world.

This conference aims to address the representation of alterity in fantasy and science fiction, its impact on cultural practices and its subversive potential. We are interested in the role of form, medium and (sub)genre in negotiations of alterity. We welcome papers analysing popular cultural texts from diverse cultural contexts. Please note that the language of the conference is English.

Potential discussion topics may include, but are not limited to:

- different (re)configurations of the Other (racialised and gendered others, cyborgs, fantastic creatures, animal others, etc.)
- socio-historical perspectives on alterity (reconfigurations of the notion of the subaltern, the uncanny, etc.)
- fictional representations of liminal or hybrid identities
- the influence of philosophy, ethics, science or anthropology (amongst others) on science fiction and fantasy
- negotiations of otherness in different media (i.e. TV, film, podcasts, computer games, web-series, music, transformative works, art, literature, etc.)
- the political impact of ethical representations of alterity

This student conference is organised by two Masters students of British and North American Cultural Studies at the University of Freiburg, Germany, Julia Ditter and Anne Korfmacher. If you are a student (B.A., M.A. or PhD level) and interested in presenting a 20-minute paper at our conference, please submit a short proposal (around 200-250 words) and a short biography (including your current study program) to exploringalterity@anglistik.uni-freiburg.de by **15 July 2018**. There is no conference fee to be paid and technical equipment for the presentation will be provided. Conference participants will be responsible for organising and paying for their own accommodation and food.

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