

Expanding 'Science Fiction' in the Nineteenth Century Full Programme

Join the Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies International (CN-CSI) on April 26 2024 for a day-long workshop of eclectic and interdisciplinary papers from guest speakers themed around Science Fiction in the Nineteenth Century.



Winslow Homer, *The Gulf Stream* (1899)
(open access image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

This workshop brings together exciting voices from a range of interdisciplinary fields to explore and expand our understandings of 'science fiction' in the nineteenth century across the globe. What we today call 'Sci-Fi' is a genre very much of the nineteenth century, canonically understood to have emerged in its earliest forms with texts like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and reaching broad popular appeal by the *fin-de-siècle* through publications from H. G. Wells onwards. This workshop adopts a provocatively broad definition of the term 'Sci-Fi' to explore the existence beyond literary fiction of creative, speculative, and fantastical engagement with new technologies and scientific practices. Our Sci-Fi 'texts' will be considered broadly, ranging from imaginative explorations of non-human others in fiction, to engagement with nineteenth-century scientific thought and technologies in Victorian 'high-art' painting. We shall see how, across the globe, fantasies and fears about these technologies, and the limits and possibilities of scientific enquiry and expansion, can be traced across areas as diverse as theatre and the visual arts, mainstream science writing, and imaginative speculative fiction.

Registration: [CNCSI Online workshop- Expanding 'Science Fiction' in the Nineteenth Century \(office.com\)](https://cnsci.office.com)

Date: April 26, 2024

Time: 12:50pm – 7:00pm (CET). Please note all talks will take place in Central European Timezone.

Free, online event.

Programme:

Please note all talks will take place in Central European Timezone.

12:50am – 1:00pm (CET) – Welcome Address

Speaker: Dr Emma Merkling, Durham University and I Tatti, Harvard University

1:00 – 1:45pm (CET) – Session 1

Title: The Origins of Japanese Science Fiction in the 19th Century

Chair: Dr Madeline Potter, University of Edinburgh

Speaker: Professor Michal Daliot-Bul, University of Haifa

2:00 – 2:45pm (CET): Session 2

Title: Edward Burne-Jones's *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1873–4): Worldbuilding, Remaking and Unmaking

Chair: Dr Emma Merkling, Durham University and I Tatti, Harvard University

Speaker: Professor Emeritus Caroline Arscott, The Courtauld Institute of Art

2:45 – 4:00pm (CET): BREAK

4:00 – 4:45pm (CET): Session 3

Title: Black Men and Sharks: Racial Futurity In and Around the 1890s

Chair: Dr Efram Sera Shriar, University of Copenhagen and Durham University

Speaker: Dr kitt price, Queen Mary University of London

5:00 – 5:45pm (CET): Session 4

Title: The *1001 Nights* and the Underpinnings of Arabic Science Fiction

Chair: Dr Tobias Wilson-Bates, Georgia Gwinnett College

Speaker: Professor Ian Campbell, Georgia State University

6:00 – 6:45pm (CET): Session 5

Title: Cosmic Invasion, Romance, and Science Fiction in Hodgson and Wells

Chair: Dr Emily Vincent, Durham University and University of Birmingham

Speaker: Professor Neil Hultgren, California State University, Long Beach (CSULB)

6:45 – 7:00pm (CET): Closing Remarks

Speaker: Dr Emily Vincent, Durham University and University of Birmingham

Speakers and Abstracts

1:00 – 1:45pm (CET) – Session 1

Chair: Dr Madeline Potter, University of Edinburgh

Speaker: Professor Michal Daliot-Bul, University of Haifa

Title: The Origins of Japanese Science Fiction in the 19th Century

Abstract

In working on the origins of Japanese science fiction during the second half of the 19th century, I look mostly for stories in which an extrapolation of scientific knowledge and

technological developments has a particular role. These early literary experimentations emerged in Japan within another new experimental genre that became quite popular from the 1880s until the early 20th century, namely, the genre of “the political novel.”

Arguably, two characteristics of such early Japanese science fiction are outstanding. First, they were explicitly political. Second, they played with imported ideas. Often, the authors merely adapted these imported ideas in creative ways. In some cases, however, they used them as a starting point for a truly original flight of imagination.

In my presentation I will explain who were the Japanese authors that were the first to experiment with science fiction writing, and what were the trans-national and local sources that inspired them. I will then use selected examples of early Japanese science fiction in order to unpack how the emerging genre in Japan responded to a broad network of contexts and knowledge, and how it negotiated a tension between “the Japanese” and “the Western,” a tension which was perhaps unique to Japanese science fiction at the time. By highlighting the perspective of a non-white tradition of science fiction on visions of the future, I hope to expand and complicate the Eurocentric view of science fiction as a hybrid genre.

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2:00 – 2:45pm (CET): Session 2

Chair: Dr Emma Merkling, Durham University and I Tatti, Harvard University

Speaker: Professor Emeritus Caroline Arscott, The Courtauld Institute of Art

Title: Edward Burne-Jones's *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1873–4): Worldbuilding, Remaking and Unmaking

Abstract

Revisiting the theme of Merlin and Nimue embarked upon in the Oxford University debating chamber murals in 1857 and subsequently in a watercolour of 1860, Burne-Jones composed a vertical- format six-foot painting for his patron Frederick Leyland in the 1870s. The blurred, gloomy distant landscape of the early watercolour, remarked upon for its poetic character and magical elements gives way to a brilliant, optically distinct, and utterly claustrophobic thicket of hawthorn branches and blossom in the 1870s oil painting as the locus for a decisive encounter between Nimue and her victim. My hypothesis is that the reconceptualization of the subject can be seen as a form of worldbuilding, invested in natural science, which has characteristics akin to the worldbuilding that sits at the juncture of some twenty-first-century science fiction and fantasy. This paper will consider the technical problems Burne-Jones had in completing 'The Beguiling of Merlin', his engagement with various literary versions of the story, and his vision of a kind of vital development that was involved with mortification and necrosis.

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2:45 – 4:00pm (CET): BREAK

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4:00 – 4:45pm (CET): Session 3

Chair: Dr Efram Sera Shriar, University of Copenhagen and Durham University

Speaker: Dr kitt price, Queen Mary University of London

Title: Black Men and Sharks: Racial Futurity In and Around the 1890s

Abstract

This paper draws together various white-authored scenes featuring black men among sharks, approaching them as speculative fictions invested in racial futurity. I begin with Winslow Homer's painting *The Gulf Stream* (1899), which generated a precognitive dream at the Maimonides Dream Laboratory in 1965. Homer's enigmatic address to post-Reconstruction racial futurity in the United States becomes entangled with the scientific validation of extra-sensory perception at the height of the civil rights movement, hinting at Homer's participation in fin-de-siecle science fictional projections of the future capacities and prospects of the human race(s). This affinity is consolidated via another heavily racialised shark scene that was published at the culmination of what is arguably the founding text of western parapsychology in Britain: Frederick Myers's study of the 'subliminal self' (1895). Here Myers placed a prophetic dream testimony featuring a black sailor and a shark at the apex of his scheme of projected human development, but in *Human Personality* (1903) he relegated this case to the lowest form of supernormal activity. Myers's handling of this dream reflects his need to simultaneously disrupt and reaffirm the racial hierarchy, reprising the logic displayed in Anglo-American painter John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* (1778). Collectively, these texts / images point to a persistent white imaginary featuring isolated, lambent black bodies at the centre of maritime distress. Combining the insights of Samuel Kimbles and Patrick Brantlinger, I read these scenes as evidence of a 'traumatized cultural unconscious' that cannot 'speak the future tense' without reprising past injury. This prompts me to ask whether the unnamed black men in these scenes might be aligned with Afro-futurism or Afro-pessimism. Drawn out of their imposed isolation, these figures invite us to reconsider what it might mean to be 'saved' from the past as we contemplate the future, whether in science fiction, in our dreams, or in any other speculative formation.

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5:00 – 5:45pm (CET): Session 4

Chair: Dr Tobias Wilson-Bates, Georgia Gwinnett College

Speaker: Professor Ian Campbell, Georgia State University

Title: The *1001 Nights* and the Underpinnings of Arabic Science Fiction

Abstract

This talk will focus on one facet of the development of SF in Arabic, which doesn't properly develop as such until the 1960s. The talk will discuss the tradition of the fantastic in Arabic literature and Muslim culture: this goes all the way back to the ninth century CE: the best-known work in the West is the *1001 Nights*, which originally come from India but have been so influenced by classical and medieval Muslim cultures as to be considered native. There are many other works: travelogues, compendia of wonders, encyclopedias, among others, all of which share to some degree with modern SF in both Arabic and Western cultures a major feature of SF: what is called "cognitive estrangement", or the use of alternative worlds to provide a critique of the real world—especially a critique that would expose the writer to potential persecution were it to be made directly. We will examine tales from the *Nights* that show alternative worlds; in addition, we will take a look at how the sexually risqué behavior in many of the tales was used as a fig leaf to keep the stories away from women and children: the point is that the stories were sequestered not because of their (in fact rather tame) sexual content, but rather because of the critique to which they subjected their societies.

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6:00 – 6:45pm (CET): Session 5

Chair: Dr Emily Vincent, Durham University and University of Birmingham

Speaker: Professor Neil Hultgren, California State University, Long Beach (CSULB)

Title: Cosmic Invasion, Romance, and Science Fiction in Hodgson and Wells

Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of science fiction, romance, and otherness in the works of two writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, H. G. Wells and William Hope Hodgson. I draw on scholarship about late-Victorian invasion narratives by Ailise Bulfin, Patrick Brantlinger, and I. F. Clarke to highlight the significance of aging planets and the nebular hypothesis in the motivation for the Martian invasion that takes place in Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1897). With this understanding of Wells in mind, I turn to aspects of three works by William Hope Hodgson that, in their attempt to understand the meaning of an aging planet and solar system, imagine sinister, monstrous, and often racialized forces invading our universe: *The House on the Borderland* (1908), *The Night Land* (1912), and Hodgson's posthumously published short story in which a scientist restages Christ's crucifixion, "The Baumoff Explosive" (1919).

While I recognize that Hodgson's fiction is more clearly aligned with the Gothic romance form than Wells's SF tale of a Martian invasion, I contend that Hodgson's works anticipate the mystical vision of the cosmos that became recognizable to post-Einsteinian readers of the twentieth century. While I acknowledge that this vision is also latent in Wells's fiction of cosmic evolution, such as his short story, "The Star" (1897) and his novel, *In the Days of the Comet* (1906), the psychological continuities of character in Gothic romance provided unique formal possibilities in the works of Hodgson. I conclude by noting echoes of Hodgson in science fiction of the early twenty-first century, in both the eschatological physics of *Doctor Who* and the strangely optimistic plot twists of Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014).

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6:45 – 7:00pm (CET): Closing Remarks

Speaker: Dr Emily Vincent, Durham University and University of Birmingham

