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Hosted online on Friday 11th February 2022, *Medical Humanities and the Fantastic: Neurodiversity and Disability* was a free symposium funded by the Centre for Medical Humanities, University of Glasgow. It was the second event in the series, the first being hosted in 2019 by the University of Liverpool and funded by the Wellcome Trust as part of the 'Science Fiction and the Medical Humanities' project. The symposium was co-hosted by the Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic and invited interdisciplinary work on neurodiversity and disability in the context of speculative fiction.

Dr. Ria Cheyne's (Liverpool Hope University), pre-recorded keynote lecture offered a warm welcome and clear definitions of her terms, logically distinguishing neurodiversity ("the fact of the variation in neurocognitive functioning of human minds") from neurodivergence ("significant neurocognitive difference from our narrowly conceived notion of normal"). It introduced the neurodiversity paradigm, "the belief that said variation is valuable and that no type of neurocognitive function is intrinsically superior or better". Her lecture rightly emphasised the importance of intersectional, non-judgmental, and fundamentally accessible discourse in this area, and of bridging the epistemological and discursive gaps between the general public and the academy.

'Panel 1: Fantastic as Methodology', was kicked off by Dr. David Hartley (Queen Mary University of London), whose engaging paper considered how films induce feelings of estrangement in the viewer, something experienced daily by autistic people, in both feeling estranged and being treated as estranging. Referencing analyses from his 'Autism through Cinema' podcast, Dr. Hartley made a distinction between "autism films" (films about autism) and "autistic films", which possess an aesthetic nervousness "of fantastical rupture" that presents an opportunity to "explore what it means to feel Othered or alienated". Among other examples, he illustrated this distinction particularly well using Lewin's *Please Stand By* (2017) and Anderson's *Punch Drunk Love* (2002).

The second paper was presented by final-year PhD candidate Emma Dee (University of Kent). Through critical consideration of Hauntology and trauma narrative, it explored how the Gothic form can depict and understand how neurodivergent and neurotypical people experience and relive (are haunted by, rather than merely recall) trauma. She described how illness narratives mirror the arc of the fiction and how their texture reflects affective experience, manifested in ways such as the mind making links "via rhyme rather than reason". These qualities are artfully woven into her own work in progress, which she orated to great effect: a disquieting lack of punctuation mirroring a manic episode in which the POV character is haunted by her trauma. She explained how the Gothic explores extremes of experience to, as she interprets Bataille, "provide answers, clarity and understanding".

Although her work does not directly address circadian rhythm disorders like my own, Dr. Josefine Wälivaara's (Umeå University) investigation into alternative relationships with time, life phases, and expected transitions certainly resonated with me. She explained how conceptions of time are steeped in normative ideas of linear progression and development, with attendant, ordered milestones from birth through to death. She analysed depictions of characters experiencing time in "non-normative ways". Of particular interest is when apparently — or expressly — able-bodied or extraordinarily able-bodied characters have a crip relationship with time. Dr. Wälivaara concluded with the insight that the storytelling conventions of science fiction ('SF') allow for purportedly universal "truths" about time and dis/ability to be defamiliarised and therefore destabilised.

Panel 2A of the day was titled 'Senses and Sensing the World Differently'. In the opening paper, 'The "City of Unseen Steps": Blindness and Palimpsestual Sensory Impressions in *Jonathan Dark or the*

*Evidence of Ghosts*', PhD candidate Sarah Neef (Dortmund University) revealed how Benedict's novel can be read as a metapalimpsest which challenges homogeneous concepts of (urban) identities and space whilst simultaneously perpetuating problematic power imbalances, gender stereotypes and ableism. She explicated the juxtaposition of characters' deeply diverging experiences of the city, relating this to Bakhtin's notion that truth is inherently dialogic and intersubjective; not one fixed thing, but a "polyphony of fully valid voices". Neef concluded with connections to neurodivergence: how do different people perceive the same city? In the novel, some characters can perceive ghosts, whereas others cannot; both experiences are valid and true.

Prof. Leigha McReynolds (University of Maryland) then invited us to consider how Delany's *Babel-17* (1967) disrupts traditional categories and assumptions of mind and body, paving the way for seeing how human variation and bodily interdependence "can promote cooperation and excellence". Prof. McReynolds explained how the novel's initial mental and physical distinctions between characters' defining job roles (for example, a Customs Officer refusing to walk around Transport Town at night) are blurred through extreme body modifications and queer — specifically, (triad) polyamorous — entanglements ("the triple"; three people interlinked both professionally and sexually). Such enmeshment is necessary to complete the work; she concluded with how this reconceptualisation of labour and productivity allows access to those with non-"normal" bodies, with the spaceship functioning as a crip utopia in which "special minds and bodies can achieve things that would otherwise be impossible".

'Panel 2B: Lived Experiences' began with a very timely paper by PhD candidate Jennifer Slagus (Brock University). It analysed two recent publications, Agarwal and Durfey-Lavoie's *Just Roll with It* (2021) and Hansen's *My Video Game Ate My Homework* (2020), that are beginning to fill a much-needed gap of ND children's fiction produced by ND authors, particularly fiction intended for 8–12-year-olds. ND creatives' melding of their own lived experiences fantasy elements is far more likely to result in more nuanced fiction that reflects the lived experiences of its target readership. Furthermore, the graphic novel medium allows ND creators to "centre ND children's needs and wants" in ways that prose novels "pale in comparison". Slagus revealed how both texts show their ND characters growing, developing new tools and coping mechanisms that "make their lives easier within the ableist confines of societal expectations", *without* "overcoming" their neurodivergence.

Next, Prof. wn-ho Yoon (Inha/Incheon University) expounded upon the web novel in the Republic of Korea from an ND perspective, explaining its origins as a response or challenge to traditional ideas of what constitutes a 'fantasy' novel. Featuring sub-genres that tailor their content to their intended readership, the medium was influenced by the emergence of online role-playing games ('RPGs') and Japanese 'light novels'. However, he highlighted how heteronormative and exclusionary these sub-genres currently are, as they identify certain topics as being applicable only to a particular (binary conception of) gender. Moreover, there is a conspicuous absence of ND writers, consumers, characters and storylines in the medium; in cases where neurodivegence *is* depicted, it is often in an egregiously infantilising, medicalised light. Prof. Yoon ended with a clarion call, proposing inclusive methodologies for maximising the involvement of "people with developmental disabilities" in mass culture and creative industries.

Finally, visual artist and PhD candidate Brian Keeley (University of Aberdeen) made a highly persuasive argument for decolonising the representation of heart transplants in film. Keeley explained how such portrayals have hitherto been based in antiquated and debunked sentimental notions of the heart being the "seat of emotion and sense of self," and the presence of a heartbeat, the difference between life and death. Citing how his personality has remained unaffected by his own heart transplant in 2013, he contended that representing such ideas on screen, especially in science fiction and horror films, trivialises and perpetuates misinformation that obfuscates the often-harsh lived experiences of people who have undergone heart transplants. Ultimately, Keeley relayed, experience-based counter-narratives to fantastic portrayals of heart transplants are

necessary to challenge the cultural acceptability of sensationalising such a serious health issue, which, if applied to "other forms of corporeal difference, disabilities, or marginalised vulnerabilities", would be considered profoundly inappropriate.

As a former student of literature and cultural studies (and proud geek), the theme of and texts discussed in Panel 3A , 'Neurodiversity and Disability on the Screen', were the most compelling. Dr. Margaret Tedford's analysis of Pratchett and Gaiman's *Good Omens* (1990) and its 2019 television adaptation demonstrated how reading non-human characters through the lens of human neurodiversity can impact audiences and readers, and what doing so suggests for the potential of neurodivergent representation in fantasy media. She detailed the intersections between the characters' "not-normal" thinking and behaviours and those of neurodivergent people in real life. She described a telling survey she conducted on social media of the novel's readership, to which 91% responded 'yes' to the question 'do you consider yourself to be neurodivergent?'. Dr. Tedford illustrated well the value that applying ND readings to the genre has for its many varied audiences and fandoms.

PhD candidate Jess Gibson (University of York) kept up the pace with her paper 'Blurring the Boundaries of Human/Machine, Dis/Ability and Good/Evil in the depiction of John Silver in Disney's *Treasure Planet*'. Her reading of John Silver considered his subtleties and character arc, drawing out his liminal status along multiple lines, and questioning whether his depiction ultimately reinforces the medical model of disability in a "supercrip stereotype", or offers more inclusive implications of "prosthetic empowerment" and "physical normalcy in the fantastic setting". Gibson identified that the choice to transpose the character's original incarnation (Long John Silver, in Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883)) to an SF setting — that is, from amputee to cyborg — is ripe for further investigation, particularly from disability and cyborg theory perspectives. Rather than embodying a simplistic, normative relationship between disability and technology, that of illness and cure, the character's depth and his optimistic — yet not toxically so — attitude towards his prosthesis also goes against an historic "reliance on cure narratives" in popular culture.

Dr. Rebecca Jones' captivating paper compared representations of augmentation in seminal works of American animation and Japanese anime. She outlined a distinction implicitly made within the respective fictional worlds between the categories of 'cyborg' and 'disabled'; whether one is considered apart from, or part of, humanity. This distinction is grappled with by the characters themselves; their inability to experience the world with a "full body or organic sensorial organ" makes them feel inhuman and question the integrity of their identity. Rather than engendering superhuman qualities, for these characters, cyborg augmentation means feeling distanced from their humanity and a lack of surety. They are no less human for it, however, as they harbour an ardent desire to be human, and to be treated as such. Dr. Jones demonstrated clearly that the very human struggles depicted within these liminal characters foster empathy within audiences and provokes "questions of human dignity in the face of augmentation, mechanisation and personal connection".

Dr. Louise Creechan's (Durham University) rousing keynote entitled 'Lifting the Veil: Neurodivergence and Narrative' centred on literary scholarship and negotiating potential tensions between it and neurodivergence. Inspired by doctoral thesis taking the form of an audio recording, her work-in-progress is the development of a critical framework informed by ND perspectives. She described methodological concerns such as avoiding diagnostic or overly prescriptive methods and the need to take accessibility of knowledge dissemination from the consumptive to the transformative, of which research co-production is a key strategy.

Last, but by no means least, the creative panel provided a refreshing and necessary bridge between the oft-diverging (!) worlds of SF scholarship and publishing. SF publisher Jo Ross-Barrett and Lambda and Hugo Award winner Bogi Takács spoke animatedly of their respective experiences. The issues discussed included the absent or underrepresentation of marginalised communities and the

employment of numerous harmful stereotypes, as well as the use of allegory in children's literature to avoid talking about disability.

Overall, it was an exciting and highly encouraging day, especially as a first-year PhD student who had been away from academia for almost 6 years. Witnessing such committed and thought-provoking work in areas close to my own personal and research interests was validating, and I look forward to attending, and perhaps presenting at, future sessions. I extend my thanks to all the speakers, the organisers, Beata Gubacsi (University of Liverpool), Dr. Dimitra Fimi (University of Glasgow), and Dr. Anna McFarlane (University of Leeds), and to Dr. Cheyne and Dr. Owen Barden (Liverpool Hope University) for inviting me to review the symposium.

**Biographical Note**

Christina Stimson is a PhD student based at The University of Sheffield, working as part of the Wellcome Trust-funded imagining technologies for Disability futures (itDf) project. Her work focuses on forming new Participatory Design processes by synthesising ethnographic and narrative-based techniques. These processes will aim to facilitate potential robot users' imaginings of their own technologised futures.

She holds a BA in English Studies from Sheffield Hallam University and an MA in English Literature (Creative Writing Pathway) from The University of Sheffield, where her research and creative work focused on worldbuilding and identity in speculative fiction. Her thesis written for the MA in Intercultural Communication (also at Sheffield) investigated interculturality in William Gibson's cyberpunk settings through Membership Categorisation Analysis and the Five General Principles of Identities-in-Practice. Her wider research interests include posthumanism, queer, disabled and other marginalised perspectives, and video games as a narrative medium.