



Imagining Environmental Futures

Symposium

9 December 2024, 13:00 - 20:30

Zaal Nick Ervinck, Zebrastraat 32, 9000 Gent

Programme

13:00 - 14:15: Keynote lecture by Mathias Thaler (University of Edinburgh), "Estrangement on a Strange Planet" – chair: Marco Caracciolo

14:15 - 14:45: Coffee break

14:45 - 16:45: Paper presentations by UGent researchers – chair: Ben De Bruyn (UCLouvain)

- Marco Caracciolo, "Mixed Feelings and Readerly Dynamics in Anthropocene Fiction"
- Elly McCausland, "Slippery Bodies: On the Importance of Fish Tales"
- Stefano Bellin, "Can We Imagine Alternative World-Ecologies? Literature and Environmental Imagination in the Age of Presentism"
- Maria Lucia Cruz Correia and Christel Stalpaert, "Natural Contract Lab: Fabulating Resilient Rivers and Collective Stewardship"

16:45 - 17:30: Light meal (sandwiches)

17:30 - 18:45: Keynote lecture by Ursula Heise (UCLA), "Distant Pasts, Near Futures, and Speculative Narrative" – chair: Stef Craps

19:00 - 20:30: Panel discussion with Ursula Heise, Mathias Thaler, and the students of the university-wide elective course [Context and Nuance](#) – chair: Stef Craps

Closing symposium International Francqui Professor Chair 2024-2025 Ursula Heise

Organizers: Stef Craps and Marco Caracciolo



Abstracts and Bios

Mathias Thaler, “Estrangement on a Strange Planet”

In this paper, I explore the ways in which the Anthropocene affects one of the key functions of narrative art: the production of estrangement. Building on Eva Horn's work, I shall show that, on a climate-changed planet, latency (“slow violence”), the entanglement of human and more-than-human worlds, and a clash of spatial and temporal scales pose new formal challenges to the repertoire of literature (and other artforms). These challenges are instructive beyond literary studies insofar as they also concern the emancipatory impact that experiences of estrangement are supposed to exert on readers and spectators, allowing them to see their ordinary habits from unexpected angles and thereby enabling them to transform their lifeworlds. Since, as Svetlana Boym reminds us, defamiliarization has both an aesthetic and a political dimension, what role should it play on a planet that is already so strange that we are now not only facing various problems of collective action, but also a veritable crisis of imagination? My argument will be that, if estrangement devices are to occupy a central role in the aesthetics and politics of the Anthropocene, they need to become attuned to its specific nature. And that is, unsurprisingly, a difficult endeavour, which partly explains why it is so hard to undo the currently dominant social imaginaries: business as usual, solutionist techno-fixes and apocalyptic fatalism.

Mathias Thaler is Professor of Political Theory in the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh. His main research interest is in contemporary political theory. Thaler regularly teaches courses on democratic theory, populism, human rights, and the morality of war and violence. From 2020 to 2023, he served as Co-Director of Research in the School of Social and Political Science. From September 2024 to June 2025, Thaler is in residence as a Fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study (Uppsala) and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (Amsterdam). Thaler is the author of *No Other Planet* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), *Naming Violence* (Columbia University Press, 2018), *Moralische Politik oder politische Moral?* (Campus, 2008), and co-editor (with Mihaela Mihai) of *Political Violence and the Imagination* (Routledge, 2020) and of *On the Uses and Abuses of Political Apologies* (Palgrave, 2014). His papers have appeared in peer-reviewed journals such as the *American Political Science Review*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Environmental Politics*, *European Journal of Political Theory*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *Political Studies*, *Political Theory*, and *Review of Politics*, among others.

Marco Caracciolo, “Mixed Feelings and Readerly Dynamics in Anthropocene Fiction”

The imaginary of climate crisis is often split between doom-and-gloom scenarios and techno-optimistic visions of a sustainable future. This paper focuses on how Anthropocene fiction (in Adam Trexler’s terminology) can complicate and challenge that binary. Building on the philosophy and phenomenology of mixed feelings, I argue that contemporary fiction can evoke an amalgam of positive and negative emotions within the dynamics of readers’ engagement with characters. This idea is illustrated through a close reading of Jenny Offill’s novella *Weather* (2020). This affective dynamic tracks the audience’s feelings for and with the characters (particularly the protagonist), but also reflects formal patterns on the level of style and narrative. In this way, Anthropocene fiction provides a form of training in (or attunement to) the complex ways in which the climate crisis impacts human communities materially and psychologically.

Marco Caracciolo is an Associate Professor of English and Literary Theory at Ghent University in Belgium. Drawing inspiration from cognitive science, the philosophy of mind, and the environmental humanities, his work explores the forms of experience afforded by narrative in literary fiction and other media (especially video games). He is the author of several books, including *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* (University of Virginia Press, 2021), *Slow Narrative and Nonhuman Materialities* (University of Nebraska Press, 2022), and *On Soulsring Worlds: Narrative Complexity, Digital Communities, and Interpretation in Dark Souls and Elden Ring* (Routledge, 2024). He currently serves as the President of the International Society for the Study of Narrative.

Elly McCausland, “Slippery Bodies: On the Importance of Fish Tales”

This is not a conventional academic paper, but perhaps a low-key manifesto of sorts. In it, I aim to argue for the importance of fish. Often seen as profoundly “other” in ways that mammals and other “charismatic megafauna” are not, fish—and our attitudes towards them—can serve as an interesting litmus test for where we are on the journey towards a more compassionate, interconnected relationship with the natural world. I will look at a series of interesting cultural moments in which the fish has figured prominently, and explore how fish—as both literally and epistemologically “slippery” bodies—tend to trouble certain categories and binaries in ways that make them ideally suited to explorations within the environmental humanities; in particular, of course, the blue humanities.

Elly McCausland is an Associate Professor of English Literature at Ghent University in Belgium. She works predominantly on children’s and young adult literature, particularly of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also on environmental humanities topics, adaptation, medievalism, and popular culture. She is the author of *Malory’s Magic Book: King Arthur and the Child, 1862-1980* (Boydell & Brewer, 2019) and *Risk in Children’s Adventure Literature* (Routledge, 2024). She also works on the editorial boards for journals *Authorship* and *Journal of Victorian Culture*, and is an award-winning food writer.

Stefano Bellin, “Can We Imagine Alternative World-Ecologies? Literature and Environmental Imagination in the Age of Presentism”

According to Jason W. Moore, “capitalism does not have an ecological regime; it is an ecological regime.” Moore and other scholars have developed the idea of “world-ecology” to overcome the dualism of nature/society and capture the entanglements of capitalist organization, power, human relations, and “nature.” If capitalism is an ecological regime, and if the current ecological regime is generating an ecological catastrophe, how can we overcome “the capital order” (Clara Mattei’s phrase) and imagine alternative “world-ecologies”? My paper will address this question by offering some thoughts on the relationship between literature and the political imagination. I will discuss how literature might help us to think whether revolutions are at all possible in a time in which capitalism is perceived as a “natural” form of life. Given that our incapacity to articulate new forms of politics has a distinctive discursive and imaginative dimension, what is the role of literature in the current presentist predicament? I will argue that “imagining environmental futures” involves learning how to inhabit uncertainty and unknowingness in productive ways, and this precisely what literature can teach us.

Stefano Bellin is a Senior Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Literary Studies at Ghent University. Prior to joining Ghent University, Bellin was a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the University of Warwick and taught at King’s College London and University College London (UCL). He has edited or co-edited four special issues of *Paragraph*, *Literature Compass*, *Parallax* (double special issue). He has published articles and book chapters on several subjects, including Primo Levi, Franz Kafka, contemporary literature and cultural memory. He is currently completing a monograph, *The Shame of Being Human: A Philosophical Reading of Primo Levi* (Peter Lang), an edited volume entitled *Levi Beyond Levi: Creative Engagements with Primo Levi* (Liverpool University Press), and two special issues (*Comparative Critical Studies* and *Literature Compass*).

Maria Lucia Cruz Correia and Christel Stalpaert, “Natural Contract Lab: Fabulating Resilient Rivers and Collective Stewardship”

Since 2021, Natural Contract Lab has constituted an alliance of care for river bodies, seeking to restore our sense of water stewardship and to become guardians of our shared stories. The Lab functions in an ongoing co-creation with art, environmental law, restorative justice, rights of nature, and ecological grief. Donna Haraway would call NCL an art-science-activist worlding. *STILL HERE: An Alliance of Care for the SZenne River* (2023-) is a case study of such a particular coalition of science, art, and activism with worlding potential. Its narrative frame is that of speculative fabulation. In this joint presentation, we explore NCL’s key artistic practice of fabulating while walking-with the SZenne River. Moving *in situ* along the SZenne, the participants hyphenate with the river as a continuous walking companion: first humbly seeping to the surface, then becoming a resilient body of water that meanders and that has been redirected, reshaped, buried under concrete, and considered dead as one of the most polluted rivers in Europe. The water memories, river stories, and grief testimonies fabulated along the waterways constitute a repertoire that continuously feeds the creation of a Living Bill. It serves as evidence for claiming the river’s legal recognition in the Belgian constitution.

Maria Lucia Cruz Correia is a waterkeeper and artist. Correia’s artistic practice expresses a deep sense of geopolitics, environmental advocacy, and kinship with the more-than-human world, weaving rituals of care, participatory performances, walking-with methodologies, and artistic fabulations. She is the initiator of Urban Action Clinic (2015), Common Dreams – Flotation School (2018-2022), VoiceofnatureKINSTITUTE (ongoing), and Natural Contract Lab (ongoing). Her transdisciplinary approach attempts to braid and transform the knowledge from rights of nature, restorative justice, environmental grief, regenerative activism, climate survival, and reciprocal care for critical landscapes. Her work has been supported by international networks such as Imagine 2020 (EU), Displacement Uncertain Journeys (SW), Be Part (EU), Green Art Lab Alliance (Gala), and TerraBatida (PT). Currently, she is a *firekeeper* at the World Ethic Forum (2022-2027), a

water representative at Confluence of European Bodies (ongoing), and an *associated artist* with Soap, for her space-oriented artistic practice (2024-2028).

Christel Stalpaert is Senior Full Professor in the Department of Art History, Musicology, and Theatre Studies at Ghent University. She is the director of the research center S:PAM (Studies in Performing Arts and Media) and a co-founder of the FWO-funded research network CoDa (Cultures of Dance). She was a Distinguished Visitor at the University of Alberta (Edmonton, Canada) in 2023 and publishes widely in the field in journals such as *Performance Research* and *The Drama Review*. She recently published *Performance and Posthumanism* (with van Baarle and Karreman; Palgrave, 2021). She is currently writing a monograph on *Hyphenated Thinking: Performance (Studies) Activating Ecological Encounters*, on hyphenating with long durational eco-performance projects from within a university infrastructure. She joined the NCL team for *STILL HERE: An Alliance of Care for the SZenne River* (2023-) as a “hyphenated thinker,” assisting in developing tools for tracing and transferring a repertoire of gestures of care for the SZenne river. The Natural Contract Lab with the SZenne river will be implemented as a twelve-week research seminar on Art & Ecology in the Arts Department at Ghent University in autumn 2025.

Ursula Heise, “Distant Pasts, Near Futures, and Speculative Narrative”

Debates about the Anthropocene and environmental change often invoke “deep time” as a new temporal horizon for thinking about Earth’s pasts and futures. But telling stories about a remote past during which humans did not exist poses significant challenges for narrative. Scientists and journalists as well as fiction writers have taken on this challenge with stories about the species extinctions that have shaped Earth’s biological life. While the Cretaceous-Paleogene demise of the dinosaurs has catalyzed the popular imagination for 150 years, the preceding four mass extinctions do not usually form part of popular discussions of the Anthropocene. How does one tell a story that stretches back 450 million years, involves no human characters, and portrays ruptures so profound that they create fundamentally different planetary conditions? How is such a story relevant for environmental presents and futures? This lecture will show that writers across genres tackle the deep past with narrative strategies borrowed from speculative fiction, and that they argue for the relevance of this history by linking it to contemporary climate change and environmental futures. It will explore how the investigation of the remote past reshapes environmental ethics and the imagination of future environments, with particular attention to the increasingly popular meme of the multiverse.

Ursula K. Heise holds the Marcia H. Howard Term Chair in Literary Studies in the Department of English and the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability at UCLA. She is a co-founder and the current director of the Lab for Environmental Narrative Strategies (LENS). Her research focuses on the environmental humanities; contemporary environmental literature, arts, and cultures in the Americas, Germany, Japan, Spain, and Vietnam; literature and science; science fiction; and narrative theory. Her books include *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford University Press, 2008) and *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), which won the 2017 book prize of the British Society for Literature and Science. She is also producer and writer of [Urban Ark Los Angeles](#), a documentary about urban parrots, and of *Grand Theft Eco*, a series of

“machinima” animated videos about the environmental futures of Los Angeles. Her most recent book, a co-edited essay collection on *Environment and Narrative in Vietnam*, was published in February 2024. She has been awarded the 2024 Biophilia Award in Environmental Humanities and Social Sciences by Spain's BBVA Foundation.