

# Worlding Futures beyond.

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## **Panel at the conference:**

„Disruptive Imaginations“, 15. - 19. August 2023, TU Dresden

## **Keywords:**

#Worldbuilding #SpeculativeFiction #Future Studies #Reimagining #Foresight  
#ScienceFiction

## **Panel Abstract:**

Imagining alternative futures is a long tradition in speculative fiction, especially Science Fiction (SF). The imaginary worlds in SF inspire us to strive for better futures and guide our actions from the present onwards. At the same time, they do not only show us the shape of things to come but they also offer us a new perspective on our present. Thus, inspiration and re-imagination have become strong operations when engaging with SF. In this way the genre sets free disruptive forces by criticizing and rebuilding systems and structures.

These movements of thought are not exclusive to SF but are also common in other fields that deal with future worlds, such as Future Studies (FS). Therefore, it is not surprising that the speculation-based approaches from SF have found their way into FS. Approaches from design theory, such as design fiction or speculative design, but also concepts from narratology, such as storytelling and worldbuilding, are used as participatory engagements in futures research. They allow to give voice to vulnerable groups, engage stakeholders in discussions and enable a critical and disruptive reflection of the present and possible futures.

In this panel we are concerned precisely with such methods of thinking about the future and work at the intersection of futures research and narrative theory, combining methods of creative writing with scenario techniques and using them to conceive participatory workshop designs to develop stories about hopeful futures. These stories serve as models for collective and disruptive action, allow for exchange and discussion about common goals, and also invite participants to reflect on their own thinking about the future.

## **Presentations**

### **Lobau Listening Comprehension, or: How to speculate against the probable**

#### **Julia Grillmayr**

The artistic research project “Lobau Listening Comprehension” by artist and ecologist Christina Gruber, environmental historian Sophia Rut and myself – a cultural studies and SF scholar –, embarks on a site-specific investigation of the Lobau, a floodplain forest in Vienna and Lower Austria. This area is not only an indicator of ecological change due to regulations of the Danube, and more recently, climate change, but has a long and complicated history of political events and protests. Inspired by selected Science Fictions, ecofeminist fabulations and contemporary supernatural horror, we’ll collaborate with neighbors, scientists, and activists to collect stories of this specific place and create a common worldbuilding to share them.

Particularly, we’ll focus on the current environmental movement in Austria for which, in recent years, the Lobau has become an important focal point, p.ex. in the form of protests against the construction of a motorway tunnel through the national park. These efforts can be understood as “speculations against the probable” as conceptualized by Isabelle Stengers and Karin Harrasser:

“Speculation, in this sense, is not about the extrapolation of the present or betting on probable processes; it has to do with a retroactive allegiance, an operation in Future II: Speculative thinking has to measure up with the possibilities that it will have brought into being.”

In our project, we’ll investigate the potential of speculative worldbuilding to disrupt ‘business as usual’ narratives, create common ground and, maybe even, inspire collective action.

### **Why scientists should build science-fiction-worlds**

#### **Isabella Hermann**

Scientists should not only read science-fiction but also write science-fiction. Science-fiction is as much about real future possibilities as it is about finding technological and social metaphors for the present. By engaging in alternative worldbuilding against the backdrop of one’s own discipline, the disruptive potentials of the future and the challenges of the present become vivid. An example for this is the newly published “Palgrave Handbook of Global Politics in the 22nd century”, in which scholars of International Studies used science-fiction

as a method to imagine the world a hundred years in the future. In the panel, I want to present this fruitful endeavor along the lines of my own contribution to the Handbook: In 2121, what we know as the UN expands to become UNCorp - the United Nations and Corporations Organization. Following significant breakthroughs in quantum computing, UNCorp has established a new body to ensure that global politics is optimized by algorithms. There is no war, no hunger and no misery anymore, but is the mechanism really unbiased? And how come the mechanism doesn't apply in the Sphere, the successor of the failed Metaverse? And what happens on Mars, where there is a secret but enduring war between different Earth alliances? The text asks critical questions about social and technological progress and the human willingness to live in peace and harmony after all.

## **Zukunfts-Schreib-Werkstatt – Worldbuilding as a participatory method to envision the future of Salzburg**

### **Wenzel Mehnert**

The future is a participatory process that is shaped by many actors and creates multiple visions. For a joint exchange about those futures and the development of shared visions, methods are needed to give a voice to stakeholders, to activate their thinking about the future and to engage them in a common discussion. One of these methods is called "Zukunftswerkstatt", developed in the 1980s by the Austrian futurologists and political activists Robert Jungk and Norbert Müllert.

Central to their thinking is the idea of community and empowering participants to envisioning positive futures and to articulate their preferred futures. However, as Jungk & Müllert point out, articulating these futures, formulating wishes to the future or just imagining futures beyond the already well-trodden paths coming from politics, advertisement and entertainment, can create a challenge for participants. Thus, it needs approaches that are easy to understand, inspiring and engaging to activate the futures muscle.

In this talk I present a participatory approach called "Zukunfts-Schreib-Werkstatt". It combines Jungks and Müllert approach with methods used in worldbuilding and creative writing, inspiring participants to articulate their preferred futures and share their visions in the form of short stories. The approach was developed during a fellowship at the Robert Jungk Bibliothek in Salzburg and resulted in 16 stories about preferable futures of the city of Salzburg.

## Biographies

Julia Grillmayr is a Vienna-based cultural studies and Science Fiction scholar, journalist and science communicator. She holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Vienna. At the University of Art and Design Linz, she explored the relationship between contemporary SF literature and futurological scenarios. Her research interests are speculative (eco)feminist philosophy and cyberpunk. She is creator of the radio broadcast Superscience Me on Radio Orange, she works for the public radio channel Ö1, and podcasts for the Austrian Academy of Science. The rest of the time, she spends in muddy danubian wetlands and in tap shoes.

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Dr. Isabella Hermann is an independent analyst and speaker in the area of science-fiction. Holding a doctorate in political science, she focuses on the question of how the genre reflects new technologies, socio-political value systems and global politics. She acts as Co-Director of the Berlin Sci-fi Filmfest. In April 2023 her book "Science-Fiction zur Einführung" will be published with Junius. After holding positions at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities and the Technical University of Berlin, she is currently also member of the board of Stiftung Zukunft Berlin.

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Wenzel Mehnert is a cultural and media scientist and works as a futurologist at the Austrian Institute of Technology and the Berlin Ethics Lab at the TU Berlin. In his research he focuses on sociotechnical imaginaries of new and emerging technologies. In addition to the analytical study of technological futures in various discourses, he develops qualitative methods to reflect on contemporary futures using creative means from design and literature. His dissertation is dedicated to the present and past imaginaries of the neurointerface in popular culture.

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