

Remarks on the Innovative Research Award 2020



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Over the past three years, it has been my pleasure to serve on the SFRA Innovative Research Award committee, chairing the committee this past cycle. The current committee consists of Ali Sperling, Gerry Canavan, and myself. I guess nobody needs to be reminded of the fact that our field is vibrant and growing in all longitudes and latitudes; what the increasing number of texts eligible for this award shows is that more and more sf/f studies are happening further afield and beyond more familiar venues such as *SFS*, *Extrapolation*, *Foundation*, and *SFFT*V.

As the saying goes, these developments might be a sign of the times since we are living in increasingly fantastic, as in strange, estranging, unreal, weird, or outright horrific times. Times where science-fictional, or more broadly perhaps, speculative modes of thinking, telling, showing, and acting are gaining more and more currency. It seems as if the proverbial tools of our trade are the only and most potent tools left to make sense of, and dare I say it, counteract the forces that affect our daily lives—from alternative facts and misinformation to systemic inequality all across the board to the necrotic excesses of late-stage petro-capitalism and the anthropogenetic destruction of our terraqueous globe. It is at this particular juncture that the winner of the 2020 SFRA Innovative Research Award has positioned his excellent and timely work. The goes to Jesse S. Cohn for his article titled “The Fantastic From Counterpublic to Public Imaginary: The Darkest Timeline?,” which appeared in *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 47, no. 3.

Jesse S. Cohn’s essay manages brilliantly the handling of contemporaneity without running the risk of becoming dated anytime soon. The essay demonstrates in thorough and far-reaching examples the importance of the fields of the fantastic, of science fiction studies, or of what he calls the “science-fictional” (448) in striking and urgent ways. The science-fictional and the fantastic have indeed “permeated the public imaginary” (452) to a degree that cannot be ignored, and that must be reckoned with both inside and outside of the academy. If we are indeed increasingly estranged from reality, as Cohn explores, this essay points to the way in which the public sphere is also increasingly structured by SF and the fantastic. Jesse Cohn’s essay exhibits this obvious relevance to the contemporary moment and the way it situates the work *SFS* does as a field as important in a way that we would like more people to see. The article does a terrific job taking a hyper-contemporary issue and read it alongside, as, and through science fiction in a way that is just a great read. Cohn’s article is the kind of work that can and actually should travel far and wide, far beyond the confines of our sf studies community. People should seek it out which is also why we think that is the kind of article that should be made available Open Access. Jesse, congratulations on producing a landmark piece of research!

As was the case last year, we found it incredibly difficult to whittle down the field of contenders to just one. There is another text where we thought that this is a piece that deserves an

honorable mention not least because it puts forth a productive challenge to us who work in the field to re-evaluate and indeed soften up the structures and strictures that undergird our work—things that we simply take for granted such as “traditional” text and publication formats. The honorable mention goes to Adriana Knouf for her essay “Xenological Temporalities in the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence, Lovecraft, and Transgender Experiences,” which was published in *Studies in the Fantastic* no. 9.

By queering the “traditional” essay form and splicing in personal letter writing, Adriana Knouff points the way to all the social justice labor that we as sf studies scholars have yet to perform to make our community even more inclusive, diverse, and equitable. Traditional formats, she argues, can limit access, including some at the cost of excluding others. The shifting between forms and genres—from the epistolary to the highly technical, to literary criticism—enacts a kind of science fiction *as itself*. It offers the kind of theoretical work that many SF scholars have long been discussing. Adriana Knouf’s piece is both personal and experimental; hopefully an inspiring example for more people to work outside the confines of academic prose and explore sf studies in new ways. It is a really fun and inventive piece, alongside being incredibly smart.