

SCIENCE FICTION: Humanity, Technology, the Present, the Future

CEH-GA 2165/ Fall 2018
Center for Experimental Humanities

Profs. Kimon Keramidas & Robin Nagle
Conference Room, CEH
Graduate School of Arts and Science

Wednesdays, 2:00 - 5:00
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Course Description

This class uses science fiction to explore how we understand ourselves in a perpetually shifting present and to look closely at how and why we cast ourselves into the future, into alternative contemporary realities, into variations on being. These conjurings suggest vastly different possibilities of what it means to be human -- indeed, what it means to be sentient.

If the genre once suffered from a certain lack of respect when compared to “proper” literary forms, it has always enjoyed a devoted readership, and in recent years it has attracted serious attention from scholars in many disciplines. Using a combination of anthropological analysis and critical theory, we will study science fiction to consider the influences that inspired often radically inventive forms of liberation, repression, social organization, economic structure, linguistic variation, gender norms, political arrangement, and configurations of self, both human and otherwise. This, in turn, illuminates assumptions that marked some of the larger cultural contexts in which these texts were created while illustrating changes in specific manifestations of the imaginary.

The semester starts with history and definitions, explores in depth a particularly well-known classic, and consider culturally significant iterations of science fiction by focusing on distinct but overlapping themes.

In a sense, our work is designed to answer, in as many ways as possible, one simple question: what is the purpose of science fiction?

NOTE: Tools and techniques used in digital humanities scholarship shape the logistics of the course. Students will learn research methods, writing styles, and presentation modes that are only possible through digital interventions. We don't compromise the integrity of older, more established scholarly practices; rather, we complement them by taking advantage of the fluidity that is only possible in digital contexts.

Learning Objectives

- To clearly articulate variations on genres, subtexts, and influences; this will be developed through close consideration of and written engagement with our source material, through class discussions, and through on-going collaborative constructive criticism.
- To become familiar with anthropological, historical, critical-theoretical, and media-studies perspectives as modes of analysis
- To become comfortable with the web-based research and presentation tools that are part of the course dynamic
- To consider the contemporary world with a more nuanced sense of the possible

Source Materials

The material for the class is drawn from many media. These include conventionally-defined texts (novels, short stories, and scholarly essays), but also encompass comics, websites, and blogs; radio broadcasts (and perhaps podcasts); films and TV shows; and video and computer games. Like the novels and short stories, the films and TV come from a long list of possibilities (i.e., 2001: A Space Odyssey; Alien; Avatar; Battlestar Galactica; Blade Runner; Brazil; Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same; Children of Men; Dark City; District 9; Dr. Who; E.T.; Galaxy Quest; I, Robot; Independence Day; Men in Black; Metropolis; Minority Report; Moon; Orphan Black; Sense8; Soylent Green; Sleeper; Star Trek; Star Wars; Terminator). Students are encouraged to suggest others.

Assignments

Weekly Texts and Participation (30%)

Each week you will provide questions related to the assigned readings. We will use these to guide class conversations, so please remember to give each question a page number (or, for web sites, films, games, etc., an appropriate reference). Participation in class discussion is of the utmost importance; students are expected to engage with the source material and with their classmates' comments.

Geek of the Week

Each student will be responsible for helping lead the discussion for one class meeting. This will include selecting one additional media text to be added to the syllabus and preparing some questions to begin the conversation in class that week. Selections should not be full books and should be approved by Profs. Keramidas and Nagle at least two weeks before class so that they can be added to the course site.

Essays (to be posted on the class blog)

- Essay 1: Drawing on the discussion in our first class, define "science fiction" and explain what you think it means (250+ words) (5%) -- DUE SEPTEMBER 12
- Essays 2 and 3: Choose from the large pool of sci-fi texts in the course web site's extended bibliography and write a critical study using the anthropological and historical approaches we've explored. This will involve both a close reading of your chosen text and historical research. (500+ words) (10%)
 - Essay 2 -- book/story text -- DUE OCTOBER 3
 - Essay 3 -- media text -- DUE October 31

Final Project: Media Treatment [Collaborative work is possible/encouraged] (45%)

Each student will develop an alternate media version of a significant science fiction text – that is, create a new take on that story and put it in a new medium. The goal of the exercise is to reenvision your chosen text from the perspective of the present, using anthropological, historical and critical analyses that we develop during the semester. Options include turning a book into a screenplay and/or storyboard, making a movie the prototype for a video game, using a narrative video game as the basis for an alternative reality experience, etc. The project will consist of three stages:

- 1.) Proposal (1000+ words) (10%) – This has four parts:
 - a. description of the original text and its socio-cultural and historic contexts;
 - b. justification for the alternate version that explains the new socio-cultural/historical contexts;
 - c. engagement with relevant theoretical perspectives as they apply to the original work and to the new version; and
 - d. a work plan for the project. -- DUE OCTOBER 17

- 2.) Prototype/Drawing/Collage/Screenplay/Storyboard/etc. (20%) – The core of the project, this is a multimedia expression of your text alternative. It will include visual representations of different locations, plot points, and experiences and will be accompanied by textual descriptions for further clarity. Where possible, it can include audio, video, locational, and other sensory expressions. There will be at least one presentation of middle stage work on the prototype. It can remain in analog format until then, but thereafter must be translated to digital output.
 - First Draft – DUE DECEMBER 5
 - Project Lab – Two two hour sessions between Dec 5th and 19th TBD
 - Project Review/Conference – DECEMBER 19
 - Final – DUE DECEMBER 22

- 3.) Reflection Paper (2000+ words) (15%) – Each student will be responsible for a statement that accomplishes two goals: a. describe the purpose of your project in relation to the original text along with historical placement of the project relative to other texts and theory in the field; and b. reflect on the process of working on the treatment, including descriptions of how disparate media forms affected your workflow, how you approached the different stages of the project, unexpected obstacles or discoveries, etc. -- DUE DECEMBER 22

Schedule**1. Sept 5: INTRODUCTION**

What is science fiction? What isn't? Says who? When?

Le Guin, Ursula K.. (1980). Introduction. *The left hand of darkness* (1st ed.). New York: Harper & Row.

Media

Ray Bradbury Explains Why Literature is the Safety Valve of Civilization (in Which Case We Need More Literature!)

2. Sept 12: WAR OF THE WORLDS, THREE+ WAYS / *Essay 1 due***Media**Must read and listen to

Wells, H. G. 1995 (1897). *The War of the Worlds*. New York: Oxford.

Welles, O. 1938. Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds." Larchmont, N.Y.: Longines Symphonette Society. (on Archive.org)

Pick one of two below

Lyndon, B. 1953. *The War of the Worlds*. Hollywood, Calif.: Paramount. (Available on Amazon and iTunes)

Spielberg, S. 2005. *War of the Worlds*. Universal City, CA: DreamWorks Home Entertainment. (Available on Amazon and iTunes)

Theory and Commentary

Pooley, J., & Socolow, M. J. (2013, October 28). The myth of the war of the worlds panic. Slate.

3. Sept 19: HISTORY

Cheney, Matthew. 2009. Ethical Aesthetics. From *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, rev'd; Samuel R. Delaney. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan.

Freedman, Carl. 1987. Science Fiction and Critical Theory. *Science Fiction Studies* 14(2): 180-200.

Gunn, James and Michael Candelaria. 2005. Excerpt from *Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction*. New York: Scarecrow Press

Jameson, Frederic. 2002. Radical Fantasy. *Historical Materialism* 10(4): 273-80.

Williams, Raymond. 1978. Utopia and Science Fiction. *Science Fiction Studies* 5(3):203-14.

4. Sept 26 – HUMAN?**Media**

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. 2012 (1822). *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. New York: Simon & Brown.

Theory and Commentary

Hayles, Katherine. 1999. Chapter 10 (247-82) in *How We Became Posthuman*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.

or

Gormel, Elana. 2011. Science (Fiction) and Posthuman Ethics: Redefining the Human. *The European Legacy* 16(3): 339-54.

5. Oct 3 – MACHINE? / *Essay 2 due*

Media

Asimov, Isaac. 2004 (1950). “Runaround” and “Reason” in *I, Robot*. New York: Bantam Dell.

Fritz Lang. (1927). *Metropolis*. New York, NY: Kino International. (Available online)

Theory and Commentary

Battaglia, Debora. 2001. Multiplicities: An Anthropologist’s Thoughts on Replicants and Clones in Popular Film. *Critical Inquiry* 27(3): 493-514.

Gray, C. H., ed. 1995. Part 4: In the Imagination. In *The Cyborg Handbook*. New York: Routledge.

7. October 10 – XENOS

Media

Butler, Octavia. 1995. *Bloodchild*. Bloodchild. New York: Tor. (the PDF is on our NYU Classes site and was also emailed to you)

Tarkovsky, A. (1972). *Solaris*. New York, NY: Janus Films. (Available through NYU Libraries here or on Youtube: Part 1, Part 2; make sure to turn on Closed Captioning for subtitles)

Theory and Commentary

Bould, Mark. “1: Sf, Tarkovsky and Lem” *Solaris* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Dick, Steven J. 2006. Anthropology and the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence. *Anthropology Today* 22(2): 3-7.

Kirksey, S. Eben & Stephan Helmreich. 2010. The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography. *Cultural Anthropology* 25(4): 545-76.

Le Guin, Ursula K. 1974. The Author of the Acacia Seeds and Other Extracts from the Journal of Therolinguistics. From *Fellowship of the Stars*, Terry Carr, ed. New York: Simon and Schuster.

7. October 17 – INTERSECTIONALITY / *Proposal due***Media**

Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same, 2011. (Available on Amazon Video)

Star Trek: The Original Series. Let that Be Your Last Battlefield. Season: 3 Ep. 15
(Available on Netflix and Amazon Video)

Theory and Commentary

Rutledge, Gregory E. 2000. Science Fiction and the Black Power/Arts Movements: The Transpositional Cosmology of Samuel R. Delany Jr. *Extrapolation* 41(2): 127-42.

8. October 24 – INTERACTIVITY**Media**

- Interactive Fiction Resources
 - Interactive Fiction Archive (<http://www.ifarchive.org/>)
 - Interactive Fiction Database (<http://ifdb.tads.org/>) (wiki-style)
 - KONGREGATE
 - The Journey Home (http://www.kongregate.com/games/Raius_/the-journey-home)
- iFiction – Resource with list of playable text adventure classics (<http://www.ifiction.org/>)
 - Classics (including Adventure, Dungeon (the original Zork), Eliza, Oregon Trail)
 - All the Zorks from Infocom (<http://www.ifiction.org/games/index.php?cat=2>)
- Internet Archive
 - Internet Arcade (<https://archive.org/details/internetarcade?&sort=-downloads&page=3>)
 - Star Trek (https://archive.org/details/arcade_startrek)
 - Console Living Room (<https://archive.org/details/consolelivingroom>)
 - Atari 2600 Games (https://archive.org/details/atari_2600_library?&sort=-downloads&page=4)
 - Frankenstein (https://archive.org/details/atari_2600_frankensteins_monster_1983_data_age_112-008)
 - Star Trek – Strategic Operations (https://archive.org/details/atari_2600_star_trek_-_strategic_operations_simulator_1983_sega_jeff_lorenz_004-0)
- MS-DOS Games
 - Dune: Battle for Arrakis (https://archive.org/details/msdos_Dune_2_-_The_Building_of_a_Dynasty_1992)
 - Neuromancer (https://archive.org/details/msdos_Neuromancer_1988)

Tools

Twine(<http://twinery.org/>) – open source nonlinear, interactive authoring tool

Inklewriter(<http://www.inklestudios.com/inklewriter/>) – hosted nonlinear authoring tool

Phaser(<http://phaser.io/>) – game design framework

Unity(<https://unity3d.com/>) – high-level, very challenging game design

Theory and Commentary

Janet H. Murray “Introduction, Chaps. 1-3 (pp. 1-103),” in *Inventing the Medium: Principles of Interaction Design as a Cultural Practice*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2012.

Carrie Heeter, “Interactivity in the Context of Designed Experiences”. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, Vol. 1, No. 1., 2000.

Neil C. M. Brown, Timothy S. Barker, and Dennis Del Favero, “Performing Digital Aesthetics: The Framework for a Theory of the Formation of Interactive Narratives,” *Leonardo* 44, no. 3 (June 2011): 212–19.

9. October 31 – URBAN/SPACES / *Essay 3 due*

- Guest Speaker Robin Nagle, Liberal Studies

Media

Miéville, China. 2007. *Un Lun Dun*. New York: Del Rey.

OR

Okorafor, Nnedi. 2015. *Lagoon*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Theory and Commentary (2 of these 3)

Childs, Mark C. 2015. Learning from New Millennium Science Fiction Cities. *Journal of Urbanism* 8(1): 97-109.

Kochin, Rob & James Kneale. 2001. Science fiction or future fact? Exploring imaginative geographies in the new millennium. *Progress in Human Geography* 25(1):19-35.

Milner, Andrew. 2004. *Darker Cities: Urban Dystopia and Science Fiction Cinema*. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7(3): 259-79.

10. November 7 – DYSTOPIA/UTOPIA

Media

Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932.

Scott, Ridley. *Blade Runner*. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 1982. (make sure to watch Director's Cut or Final Cut)

Theory and Commentary

Baccolini, Raffaella. 2004. The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction. *PMLA* 119(3): 518-21.

Milner, Andrew, et al. 2015. Ice, Fire, and Flood: Science Fiction and the Anthropocene. *Thesis Eleven* 13(1): 12-27.4

11. November 14 – DOGMA/DOCTRINE

Media

Herbert, F. (1965). *Dune*. Philadelphia: Chilton Books.

Battlestar Gallactica (2005) 33. Season: 1 Ep. 1 (Available on iTunes and Amazon Video)

Theory and Commentary

Dourish, Paul and Genevieve Bell. 2014. "Resistance is Futile": Reading Science Fiction Alongside Ubiquitous Computing. *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing* 18(4):769-778.

McCurdy, Howard E. 1973. Fiction Phenomenology, and Public Administration. *Public Administration Review* 33(1): 52-60.

12. November 21 -- NO CLASS: Thanksgiving Eve

13. December 5 – TIME/SPACE / *Prototype draft due*

Media

Kubrick, Stanley. *2001: A Space Odyssey*. New York, N.Y., 1968.(Amazon, iTunes)

Cosmos: A Personal Voyage. "Travels in Space and Time." Season 1 Episode 8. 1980.

Theory and Commentary

Gorman, Alice. 2005. The Cultural Landscape of Interplanetary Space. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 5(1):85-107.

13. December 12 – SCI-FI CULTURE

Media

Parisot, D. *Galaxy Quest*. Hollywood Calif.: DreamWorks Pictures, 1999. (Netflix, Amazon Video, iTunes)

Theory and Commentary

Geraghty, Lincoln. 2005. "Creating and Comparing Myth in Twentieth-Century Science Fiction: Star Wars and Star Trek." *Literature/Film Quarterly*.

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: NYU Press.

- Excerpts from "Matt Hills Interviews Henry Jenkins" (9-36)
- Star Trek Rerun, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching (37-60)
- "Out of the Closet and into the Universe": Queers and Star Trek (89-112)

14. December 19 – PROTOTYPE PROJECT REVIEW / CONFERENCE

December 22 – *Prototype final due, reflection paper due*