

Social Science Fiction from the Sixties to the Present

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Office Hours: To be announced

Course Description

The label “social science fiction,” initially coined by Isaac Asimov in 1953 as a broad category to describe narratives focusing on the effects of novel technologies and scientific advances on society, became a pejorative leveled at a new group of authors that rose to prominence during the sixties and seventies. These writers, who became associated with “New Wave” science fiction movement, differentiated themselves from their predecessors by consciously turning their backs on the pulpy adventure stories and tales of technological optimism of their predecessors in order to produce experimental, literary fiction. Rather than concerning themselves with “hard” science, social science fiction written by authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin and Samuel Delany focused on speculative societies (whether dystopian, alien, futuristic, etc.) and their effects on individual characters. In this junior tutorial you’ll receive a crash course in the groundbreaking science fiction of the sixties and seventies (with a few brief excursions to the eighties and nineties) through various mediums, including the experimental short stories, landmark novels, and innovative films that characterize the period. Responding to the social and political upheavals they were experiencing, each of our authors leverages particular sub-genres of science fiction to provide a pointed critique of their contemporary society.

During the first eight weeks of the course, as a complement to the social science fiction we’ll be reading, students will familiarize themselves with various theoretical and critical methods that approach literature as a reflection of the social institutions from which it originates, including Marxist literary critique, queer theory, feminism, critical race theory, and postmodernism. Through these methods we will consider the ways in which our novels, short fiction, and films confront the marginalization of certain social groups and the problems presented by speculative circumstances such as alien contact and the development of advanced artificial intelligence. Following this initial focus, the course undergoes a major shift as we round out our exploration of the social science fiction of earlier decades with William Gibson’s groundbreaking 1984 cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*. Grounded in the social concerns of New Wave writers, the enormous influence of *Neuromancer* facilitated the absorption of what was previously radical into the science fiction mainstream. Our course will re-enact this pivot within the genre as we jump ahead in time for the last several weeks in order to focus on contemporary fiction and secondary criticism, and to interrogate how science fiction continues to engage with the social issues confronted in the genre’s foundational texts.

Course Goals

Over the course of the semester, students will learn how to conduct scholarly research in the discipline of English literary studies, culminating in the composition of a 20-25 page research paper. Students will gain experience working with a variety of sources and applying various theoretical and critical approaches, particularly Marxist literary theory and its critical successors. Students will work closely with the instructor to hone

integral scholarly skills, such as designing a research question, conducting research, compiling a critical bibliography, and sharpening writing.

Assignments and Grading

- **Short Essay** (Week 4, 10%): 5-6 page paper, comprising an extended close reading of one of the texts on our syllabus.
- **Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography** (Week 6, 15%): 2-3 page prospectus of the paper before you begin to work on it. Your annotated bibliography should include 8-10 scholarly sources, and describe, in a few sentences, how each source engages with the thesis of your project.
- **Draft** (Week 11, 15%): A full draft of the final paper will be due on Week 11 and then circulated among classmates the following week in preparation for a final paper workshop during the final tutorial meeting.
- **Final Essay** (Reading Period, 40%): 20-25 page paper incorporating 8-10 critical sources.
- **Minor Assignments and Participation** (20%):
 - 2 short response papers of 1-2 pages, focusing on a passage from one of our primary texts (sign-ups during first class)
 - 2 in-class presentations summarizing one of our critical articles (sign-ups during first class)
 - **Participation and Preparation:** A small seminar thrives when students participate actively and offer thoughtful contributions to class discussion.

Required Texts (most available as cheap mass market paperbacks)

Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

William Gibson, *Neuromancer*

Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Annalee Newitz, *Autonomous*

Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*

Rivers Solomon, *An Unkindness of Ghosts*

All short stories and secondary readings will be available in pdf format on the course website.

To look at before our first meeting:

Examine Ward Shelley's "The History of Science Fiction" map here:

<http://www.wardshelley.com/paintings/pages/fullpics/HistSciFi2.jpg>

Interview with Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Paris Review* 206 (Fall 2013)

Week 1: What Defines a Genre? Structuralist Approaches and the "Golden Age" of Science Fiction (sf)

Beginning before our primary period of focus, we examine short stories from sf's "Golden Age," while considering the classification of sf as a genre, and what constitutes a literary genre more broadly. We'll also set aside time to discuss the general plan of the tutorial.

- Short Stories:

- Isaac Asimov, "Reason" (1941)
- Judith Merril, "That Only a Mother" (1948)
- Arthur C. Clarke, "The Nine Billion Names of God" (1953)
- Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, Chapter Three, "Concepts of Genre"
- John Rieder, "On Defining SF, or Not: Genre Theory, SF, and History"
- Darko Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition" and "SF and the Novum" in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*

Week 2: New Wave Science Fiction and Marxism

We are introduced to the sf "New Wave" via short stories representative of some of the major themes that will recur throughout the course, including critical utopias and social marginalization. Broderick provides history and context for "New Wave" sf, and we begin to think about Marxism (which undergirds much of our theoretical work) with Lukács.

- Short Stories:
 - Samuel R. Delany, "Aye, and Gomorrah" (1967)
 - Phillip José Farmer, "Riders of the Purple Wage" (1967)
 - Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973)
- Damien Broderick, "New Wave and Backwash: 1960-1980"
- Georg Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism"

3: "Anthropological" Science Fiction and Queer Theory

Le Guin's classic exploration of gender and sexuality through the eyes of an alien observer considers the possibilities of a world and a humanity that is not fundamentally divided along boundaries of gender and sexuality. Our critical texts interrogates this same topic, and the short story finds Le Guin returning to the world of *TLHoD* with benefit of nearly thirty years of societal change to respond to a specific criticism leveled at her earlier novel.

- Novel: Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)
- Short Story: Ursula K. Le Guin, "Coming of Age in Karhide" (1995)
- Chrys Ingraham, "Heterosexuality: It's Just Not Natural!"
- Wendy Pearson "Alien Cryptographies: The View from Queer"
- Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence"

4: Utopian Fiction and Feminism

Short Essay Due

Possible feminist utopias and dystopias feature in Russ' novel, which finds a female warrior traveling back to the contemporary '60s to warn the protagonist about an imminent war between men and women. We'll explore feminist and utopian theory while continuing to consider last week's gender and sexuality criticism.

- Novel: Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (1975)

- Annette Kolodny, "Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism"
- Helen Merrick, "Fantastic Dialogues: Critical Stories about Feminism and Science Fiction"
- Tom Moylan, "The Critical Utopia"

5: Library/Research Visit

6: Alien Fiction and Critical Race Theory

Paper Prospectus and Bibliography Due

Continuing with short stories from two of the most eminent sf writers of the New Wave, we'll consider alien fiction as a means of exploring systemic racial injustice, while considering critical race theory, representation, and audience in sf via our secondary readings.

- Short Stories:
 - Samuel R. Delany, "Empire Star" (1966)
 - Octavia Butler, "Bloodchild" (1984)
- Octavia Butler, "Lost Races of Science Fiction"
- Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Writing, 'Race,' and the Difference it Makes"
- Edward James, "Yellow, Black, Metal, and Tentacled: The Race Question in American Science Fiction"

7: Science Fiction in Film and Postmodernism

In addition to the socially-minded writing of the New Wave, science fiction filmmaking flourished in the sixties and seventies, with Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977) at opposite ends of the spectrum, the former staking a claim for science fiction filmmaking as serious art, the latter a precursor to the modern blockbuster. Our films this week are representative of sf cinema of the seventies, and serve as useful lenses through which to approach postmodernism.

- Film, Michael Crichton, dir. *Westworld* (1973)
- Film: Michael Anderson, dir. *Logan's Run* (1976)
- Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra"
- Terry Eagleton, preface to *The Illusions of Postmodernism*
- Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society"

8: Android / AI Fiction and Posthumanism

Optional: Revised Paper Prospectus and Bibliography

Building on last week's engagement with postmodern criticism, we'll examine posthumanism as an extension of postmodernism by means of Dick's influential short novel and its more widely influential (and, frankly, superior) film adaptation. Focus on *Blade Runner* will also introduce us to the conception of "cyberpunk," which we'll

explore critically next week when we shift from primarily theoretical to secondary criticism.

- Novel: Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968)
- Film: Ridley Scott, dir. *Blade Runner* (1982)

- Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"
- Elaine L. Graham, "Introduction: Mapping the Post/human" and "The Mechanical Slave" in *Representations of the Post/human: Monsters, Aliens, and Others in Popular Culture*
- Bruce Sterling, "Preface" to *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*

9: The Cyberpunk "Revolution"

This week marks the turning point of the tutorial, during which we'll complete the last of our sf "classics" with the novel most representative of the broad subgenre known as cyberpunk: *Neuromancer*. We'll consider the conception of the cyberpunk aesthetic of the 1980s, how it emerged from the social circumstances articulated by postmodernism, and interrogate some of the criticisms levelled at the subgenre.

- Novel: William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984)

- Veronica Hollinger, "Cybernetic Deconstructions: Cyberpunk and Postmodernism"
- Rob Latham, "Cyberpunk and the New Wave: Ruptures and Continuities"
- Tom Moylan, "Global Economy, Local Texts: Utopian/Dystopian Tension in William Gibson's Cyberpunk Trilogy"
- Nicola Nixon, "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied?"

10: Post-Cyberpunk and AI / Robot Fiction

****10 Pages of Final Paper Draft Due****

Time jump! Moving from classic sf media to modern (re)interpretations of the genre, we start with a sequel to *Bladerunner*. We'll also begin reading *Autonomous*, a post-cyberpunk novel that explores themes resonant with *Blade Runner 2049*, including ownership, personhood, and identity. Secondary articles reflect on the contemporary relevance of classic cyberpunk tropes as well as the film's concern with biocapitalism.

- Film: Denis Villeneuve, dir. *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)
- Novel: Annalee Newitz, *Autonomous* (2017), part one

- Sherryl Vint, "Vitality and Reproduction in *Blade Runner 2049*"
- Paul Walker-Emig, "Neon and Corporate Dystopias: Why Does Cyberpunk Refuse to Move On?" from *The Guardian*

11. Virtual and Modified Bodies in SF

****Full Draft of Final Paper Due****

Finishing up *Autonomous*, we'll consider its engagement with various theoretical concepts, and focus on two topics that popped up in *Neuromancer* and reappear here (and remain prevalent throughout sf media): the "virtual body" and the technological mutability of the body.

- Novel: Annalee Newitz, *Autonomous* (2017), part two
- Ross Farnell, "Body Modification"
- N. Katherine Hayles, "Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers"

12. Constructing Social Space in Outer Space: Afrofuturism and *An Unkindness of Ghosts*

****Circulate Drafts to Classmates****

Our final novel, *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, takes place on a generation ship (sf trope!) stratified along racial and socio-economic lines, and contends with racism, misogyny, and homophobia. This week, we'll consider the novel through the lens of the broad term "afrofuturism," and consider whether or not Solomon's novel can/should be read within this tradition.

- Novel: Rivers Solomon, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017), part one
- Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism"
- Hugh Charles O'Connell, "Science Fiction and the Global South"

13. Final Discussion and Paper Workshop

We'll devote about 30 minutes to wrapping up discussion of *An Unkindness of Ghosts* and general conversation about the course as a whole before beginning our final paper workshop.

- Novel: Rivers Solomon, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017), part two