Social Science Fiction from the Sixties to the Present
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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:

For an introductory overview of the various periods of sf, read Gary Wolfe, "Literary Movements" from the Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction

**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:
  - Henry Bates, "Farewell to the Master" (1940)
  - Isaac Asimov, “Reason” (1941)
  - Judith Merril, “That Only a Mother” (1948)
  - Ray Bradbury, “Mars is Heaven!” (1948)

- 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 Marxist Literary Critique**
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:
Philip K. Dick, “The Electric Ant” (1965)
Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973)
James Tiptree Jr., “The Women Men Don’t See” (1973)

- Damien Broderick, “New Wave and Backwash: 1960-1980”
- Fredric Jameson, “On Interpretation,” from The Political Unconscious
- Fredric Jameson, “Progress versus Utopia; Or, Can we Imagine the Future?”

3: The Female Man and the Feminist Utopia
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)

- Joanna Russ, “The Image of Women in Science Fiction”
- Tom Moylan, “The Literary Utopia” (required) and “The Female Man” from Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination

4: “Anthropological” Science Fiction and Gender/Queer Theory
**Short Essay Due**
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.


- Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”
- Chrys Ingraham, “Heterosexuality: It’s Just Not Natural!”
• Wendy Pearson “Alien Cryptographies: The View from Queer”

5: Library/Research Visit

6: Alien Fiction and Critical Race Theory

**Paper Prospectus and Bibliography Due**
Continuing with a novella and a short story 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. We’ll also consider critical race theory, representation, and audience in sf via our secondary readings.

- Novella:
  - Samuel R. Delany, “Empire Star” (1966)
- Short Story:

- Octavia Butler, “Lost Races of Science Fiction”
- 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 film-making 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 and Marxism.

- Film, Michael Crichton, dir. *Westworld* (1973)
- Film: Ridley Scott, dir. *Alien* (1979)

- Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra”
- Terry Eagleton, preface to *The Illusions of Postmodernism*
- Fredric 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.

- Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto”

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.

- Cynthia Davidson, “Riviera's Golem, Haraway’s Cyborg: Reading *Neuromancer* as Beaudrillard’s Simulation of Crisis”
- Veronica Hollinger, “Cybernetic Deconstructions: Cyberpunk and Postmodernism”
- Rob Latham, “Cyberpunk and the New Wave: Ruptures and Continuities”
- Bruce Sterling, “Preface” to *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*

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 Blade Runner. 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)
• Nicola Nixon, “Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied?”
• Sherryl Vint, “Vitality and Reproduction in *Blade Runner 2049*”

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.


• 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.

• Short Story: N.K. Jemisin, “Emergency Skin” (2020)

• 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 45 minutes to wrapping up discussion of *An Unkindness of Ghosts* as well as the two short stories assigned before moving on to general conversation about the course as a whole. Then, we’ll reserve the rest of the class for our final paper workshop.
• Short Stories:
  o Ted Chiang, “Exhalation” (2019)
  o Rebecca Roanhorse, “Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience™” (2018)