

Cecilia Mancuso

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## **Contemporary Science Fiction and Critical Theory**

### **[COURSE DESCRIPTION]**

Science fiction (sf) has often been defined as a “literature of ideas” – everything from a vector for hard scientific knowledge to a soft-science thought experiment. But which “ideas” is sf particularly good at communicating, and why those ideas? In this course, students will familiarize themselves with a number of theoretical and literary-critical approaches to the study of literature through the lens of contemporary science fiction and its principal genres (dystopia, cyberpunk, space opera, afrofuturism, and hard sf). This course also takes a multimedia approach to sf as a genre, including novels, short stories, TV, and video games as primary texts. Students will leave the tutorial with a 20-25 page research-based junior essay which engages substantively with literary theory and a working methodology for how to approach producing extended-length scholarly papers.

### **[REQUIRED COURSE TEXTS]**

- N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (ISBN9780316229296)
- Cixin Liu, *The Three-Body Problem* (ISBN 9780765382030)
- Annalee Newitz, *Autonomous* (ISBN 978065392077)
- Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice* (ISBN 9780316246620)

### **[COURSE MATERIALS ENCOURAGED BUT NOT REQUIRED]**

- Supergiant Games, *Transistor* (available for iOS, PC, and Mac)
- A Netflix subscription (or access to one)

PDFs of all other course readings will be made available either as paper copies or through the course site.

### **[GRADING]**

- Participation and weekly assignments: 10%
- First paper, 5-7 pages, due Feb 8 by 5pm: 15%
- Proposal & annotated bibliography, 2 pages and 8-10 sources, due March 1 by 5pm: 15%
- Rough draft, 15-20 pages, due April 11 by 5pm: 20%
- Final draft, 20-25 pages, due May 2 by 5pm: 40%

### **[SOME EXPECTATIONS]**

1. Attend course and tutorial program-wide meetings.
2. Meet course and tutorial program-wide deadlines.
3. Read thoroughly and attentively.
4. Complete short weekly assignments to engage with the material (composing questions, summarizing, synthesizing, etc.)

5. Bring physical copies of readings to class.
6. Check email regularly for course announcements.
7. Be proactive.
8. Communicate with me as soon as possible about questions, concerns, and difficulties.
9. Be prepared to take risks and be intellectually vulnerable.
10. Respect others, their ideas, and their time.

For a full explanation of course policies (as well as what you can expect of me in turn), please see the “Tutorial Expectations” document included after the tentative schedule.

### [TENTATIVE SCHEDULE]

Note that weekly reading is divided into “required” and “optional further” reading. You are expected to have thoroughly and attentively read all “required” readings, which will form the basis of our weekly discussions. “Optional further” readings need not be prepared in advance of discussion; they are included to add context or extend one's exploration of a topic, especially in the event that you want to engage with that topic in your tutorial paper. If you have questions about the significance of a particular optional reading or would like to discuss further reading suggestions for a particular topic, please feel free to reach out.

**To be read before the semester begins:** N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (2015), p1-162

#### **January 22 – Week 1: SF and Structuralist Genre Theory**

What defines science fiction? Estrangement, cognition, and a novum, according to literary critic Darko Suvin. Like a lot of early theories about sf, Suvin’s foundational definition of sf is informed by structuralism – a method of literary criticism which tries to identify common narrative structures and set up binaries to define what a certain type of literature is and isn’t. This week, we’ll talk about what being structuralist about genre means (Todorov), debate the merits of Suvin’s theory of sf, and test that theory on a few sf texts which share a common theme (Pohl/Kornbluth, Tiptree, Liu).

Required reading:

- Frederik Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth, excerpts from *The Space Merchants* (1952) (~25p)
- James Tiptree, Jr., “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” (1973) (36p)
- Ken Liu, “The Perfect Match” (2012) (~20p)
- Tzvetan Todorov, “Literary Genres” from *The Fantastic* (1975) (20p)
- Darko Suvin, “Estrangement and Cognition” (1979) (8p)

Optional further reading:

- Northrop Frye, “A Polemical Introduction” from *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) (25p)
- Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., “Second Beauty: Fictive Novums” from *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (2008) (28p)

#### **January 29 – Week 2: Dystopia and Marxist Theory**

Marxist theory and sf have a unique relationship; for Frederic Jameson, a key figure in both Marxist and sf literary criticism, science fiction holds a unique power because it allows its readers to imagine a future in which things are different from the present – a key step in any revolution. This week, we'll discuss Marx's base-structure-superstructure model and Jameson's ideas about imagining the future through sf through the lens of dystopia. In our primary texts (Bacigalupi, 3%), we'll track how Marx's model manifests and debate whether dystopian sf can change the present by warning us about the future.

Required reading:

- Paolo Bacigalupi, "Pop Squad" (2006) (26p)
- 3%, 1.1 "Cubes" and 1.8 "Button" (2016) (~90min)
- Karl Marx, preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) (3p)
- Frederic Jameson, "Progress Versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future?" (1982) (11p)

Optional further reading:

- Roger Luckhurst, "Border Policing: Postmodernism and Science Fiction" (~10p)
- Jill Lepore, "A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction" (*The New Yorker*, 2017) (9p)

## **Tutorial Program Meeting #1: Date TBA**

### **February 5 – Week 3: Library Visit**

### **February 8 – First paper due by 5pm**

### **February 12 – Week 4: Dystopia/Cyberpunk and Queer Theory**

Where are the queer individuals in science-fictional futures, and why aren't there more of them? This week, we'll acquaint ourselves with the "queer futurity" debate in contemporary queer theory (Edelman and Muñoz) and discuss how these ideas are reflected in depictions of queer futures (*Black Mirror*, *The Handmaid's Tale*). We'll also touch on the "bury your gays" trope and recent controversies surrounding its revival in contemporary sf.

Required reading:

- *Black Mirror*, 3.4 "San Junipero" (2015) (~60min)
- *The Handmaid's Tale*, 1.3 "Late" (2017) (~50min)
- Lee Edelman, "The Future is Kid Stuff" from *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) (32p)
- José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Utopia" from *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) (18p)

Optional further reading:

- Sara Ahmed, "Unhappy Queers" in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) (33p)
- James McConaughy, "What Led to Lexa: A Look at the History of Media Burying its Gays" (*The Mary Sue*, 2016) (14p)

## **Tutorial Program Meeting #2: Date TBA**

### **February 19 – Week 5: Cyberpunk and Gender Theory**

In futures where we can swap or shed our bodies and create new categories of beings, what happens to our ideas of gender? This week, we'll review some foundational gender theory (Butler) and some pushback against that theory (Serano) before diving into a discussion of why created beings like cyborgs are often used in sf to explore themes of gender and its fluidity (Newitz). We'll also carry through our discussion from last week by working through a utopian trans\* narrative (Aoki) and asking how utopian attitudes to gender differ from utopian attitudes to sexuality.

Required reading:

- Annalee Newitz, *Autonomous* (2017), p1-164
- Ryka Aoki, "The Gift" in *Meanwhile, Elsewhere* (2017) ()
- Judith Butler, excerpt from *Gender Trouble* (1990) (~20p)
- Julia Serano, "Gender is More Than Performance" (2013) (~5p)

Optional further reading:

- Judith Butler, preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble* (~10p)
- Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (2015) (160p)

### **February 26 – Week 6: Cyberpunk and Posthuman Theory**

Building off of last week, in futures where we can swap or shed our bodies and create new categories of beings, what happens to our ideas of identity writ large? This week, we'll discuss Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," a key intersection between posthuman and feminist theory. We'll also review why, twenty years after its publication, a small group of sf writers got together to argue that posthuman sf about cyborgs and fractured identities (Newitz), among other things, would pave the future for sf (Ryman et. al.).

Required reading:

- Annalee Newitz, *Autonomous* (2017), p164-303
- Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1984) (26p)
- Geoff Ryman et. al., "The Mundane Manifesto" (2004) (~4p)

Optional further reading:

- N. Katherine Hayles, prologue to *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) (4p)
- Rosi Braidotti, "Posthumanism: Life Beyond the Self" in *The Posthuman* (2013) (42p)

## **Tutorial Program Meeting #3: Date TBA**

**March 1 – Proposal and annotated bibliography due by 5pm**

### **March 5 – Week 7: Cyberpunk/Space Opera and Posthuman Theory**

How do cyborg bodies work as metaphors for cyborg consciousness, and how do we distinguish what's inside from what's outside? This week, we'll continue our discussion of Haraway by

reviewing contemporary responses to and extensions of her cyborg theory (Kakoudaki). We'll try to apply this theory to some more cyborg fiction (*Transistor* and Leckie).

Required reading:

- Supergiant Games, *Transistor* (2014) [Note: you may either play the game yourself or watch a YouTube walkthrough without commentary.]
- Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice* (2013), p1-150
- Despina Kakoudaki, "Introduction: Robot Anatomies" in *Anatomy of a Robot: Literature, Cinema, and the Cultural Work of Artificial People* (2014) (28p)

Optional further reading:

- Zoe Sofoulis, "The Cyborg, its Manifesto, and Their Relevance Today" (2015) (8p)

### **March 12 – No class (Spring Break)**

### **March 19 – Week 8: Space Opera and Theories of Empire**

Under imperialism, who gets to speak, and how does the group consciousness of empire justify silencing individual members of that empire? This week, we'll read a landmark piece of postcolonial theory (Spivak) and discuss how it resonates with an example of the subgenre of space opera (Leckie) – a transposition of the structures and problems of earthly imperialism onto an intergalactic stage.

Required reading:

- Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice* (2013), p150-400
- Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1983) (~40p)

**SOMETIME BETWEEN NOW AND TURN-IN, YOU MUST MEET WITH THE DEPARTMENTAL WRITING FELLOW AT LEAST ONCE TO DISCUSS YOUR WRITING. THE EARLIER YOU DO THIS, THE GREATER THE IMPACT IT WILL HAVE ON YOUR OVERALL DRAFT. DO NOT WAIT UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE.**

### **March 26 – Week 9: Afrofuturism and Theories of Race**

Should we read the main science-fictional element of Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* ("orogeny") as a metaphor for race? To answer these questions, we'll read the novel's second act alongside theories of race which have heavily influenced literature writ large (Du Bois and Fanon).

Required reading:

- N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (2013), p162-324
- W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) (5p)
- Frantz Fanon, "The Black Man and Psychopathology" (excerpt) from *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) (~15p)

### **April 2 – Week 10: Afrofuturism and Theories of Representation**

Is *The Fifth Season* Afrofuturism? This week, as we conclude our reading of *The Fifth Season*, we'll consult intra-genre criticism on SF depictions of race (James) and some contemporary definitions of the subgenre Afrofuturism (Syms) and try to classify Jemisin's novel generically.

Required reading:

- N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (2015), p324-488
- Edward James, "Yellow, Black, Metal, and Tentacled: The Race Question in American Science Fiction" from *Black and Brown Planets* (1990) (19p)
- Martine Syms, "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto" (2013) (3p)

### **April 9 – Week 11: Hard SF and Theories of Representation**

Who gets to write, read, and star in contemporary SF? This week, we'll discuss the controversy surrounding the 2015 Hugo Awards – a clash between the genre's increasingly diverse present and its stereotypically white, male, Western past (Wallace). We'll also begin to read a novel which was swept up in the controversy owing to its author being the first Asian writer to win the Hugo for Best Novel (Liu).

Required reading:

- Cixin Liu, *Three Body Problem* (2006), p1-196
- Amy Wallace, "Sci-Fi's Hugo Awards and the Battle for Pop Culture's Soul" (*Wired*, 2015) (13p)

### **April 11 – Rough draft due by 5pm**

### **April 16 – Week 12: Hard SF and Theories of Global Literature**

While literature circulates worldwide, either in Anglophone editions or in translation, the way we study literature is still very much subdivided by nation and language. This makes it tricky to properly study genres like SF which are becoming increasingly global in scope despite purportedly originating primarily in the US and Europe. This week, as we finish up our reading of international phenomenon *The Three-Body Problem*, we'll discuss its reception history alongside some theories of global literature (Casanova) and how SF as a genre is responding to globalization (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.).

Required reading:

- Cixin Liu, *Three Body Problem* (2006), p196-388
- Pascale Casanova, "Literature as World" (2005) (20p)
- Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., "What Do We Mean When We Say 'Global Science Fiction'? Reflections on a New Nexus" (2012) (15p)

### **April 23 – Week 13: Student Choice**

### **May 2 – Final draft due by 5pm**

**Tutorial Program Conference: Date TBA**

**[TUTORIAL EXPECTATIONS]**  
**a.k.a. the Fine Print**

**AS A MEMBER OF MY TUTORIAL, I EXPECT YOU TO:**

- Attend tutorial every week for all 113 minutes. Be ready to start class on “Harvard time” – at seven minutes past the hour – and don’t pack up until tutorial is over. You’re allowed one unexcused absence, no questions asked. Missing additional meetings without a letter from a doctor or Resident Dean will have a negative impact on your participation grade.
- Be prepared. Come to section having completed the reading, with all texts in hand. If assigned readings exist primarily online, please print them out and bring them to section.
- Actively and respectfully participate in discussion. “Participating” doesn’t mean “constantly saying brilliant things.” We participate by talking and listening, by presenting our own ideas and responding to other folks’. It’s important to me that this tutorial is a place where everyone feels comfortable sharing thoughts, testing theories, and making mistakes. If for any reason you don’t feel comfortable doing those things in this course, please reach out to me.
- Close laptops and silence cell phones. I know, I know – laptops in class aren’t all Facebook, and shopping. Tutorial, however, is about exchanging ideas face to face with your peers, and it can be tough to do that from behind a laptop screen. If you need a laptop in section for reasons of accessibility, please come discuss that with me. Out of respect for your classmates, please don’t text or check your phone during section.
- Turn in all course and section assignments on time. Unless otherwise indicated, assignments must be submitted to me by email by 5pm on their due date. I will sometimes ask you to complete short written assignments, pose questions, or submit responses to pre-circulated discussion topics. You’ll always have advance notice and a clear due date and time on these assignments. Late work will be penalized up to 1/3 of a letter grade per day unless you’ve spoken to me beforehand. Because many of our deadlines are set by the tutorial program overall rather than by me, I have limited ability to grant extensions. Letting me know at least 72 hours in advance if you anticipate problems handing something in by a certain deadline gives me a chance to support and accommodate your circumstances; without a letter from a Resident Dean or HUHS, letting me know with shorter notice means there’s likely little or nothing I can do to help.
- Submit original work. As for all Harvard courses, work you submit must be work that you (and nobody else) did for this course (and not for another course). You are welcome and encouraged to discuss course material with other students; however, if ideas you submit in a written assignment originated in a section discussion or a conversation with another student, that intellectual debt must be properly cited. You may not submit work for this course and another course (at Harvard or elsewhere) without prior explicit permission from both courses’ instructors. Please familiarize yourself with the college’s policies on academic dishonesty and plagiarism (<https://handbook.fas.harvard.edu/book/academic-integrity>) and come talk to me before submitting an assignment if you have questions or concerns about its academic integrity.

## **AS YOUR INSTRUCTOR, YOU CAN EXPECT ME TO:**

- Make myself accessible during regularly scheduled office hours. Need something from the readings clarified? Feeling lost in discussion? Struggling to define the scope of your paper? Want to talk over something you found fascinating about the course material? Make an appointment to chat about any and all of these things during my office hours at [www.cecimancuso.youcanbook.me](http://www.cecimancuso.youcanbook.me). If a scheduling conflict makes it impossible for you to attend my regularly scheduled office hours, you may email me to explore the possibility of arranging a meeting at some other time.
- Help you work through difficulties with the class. If you're having a hard time with any part of the class, please come talk to me about it. I may clarify the material, give you tips based on my own experience, or suggest you check out Harvard's Bureau of Study Counsel (<https://bsc.harvard.edu>), which helps folks develop research and study skills and overcome all kinds of academic challenges.
- Respond to your emails in a timely manner. If you email me between 9am and 5pm on a work day (Monday-Friday), you can expect a response by the end of the day. If you email me after 5pm on a work day, you can expect a response by the end of the following day. If you email me on the weekend (after 5pm on Friday and before 9am on Monday) you can expect a response by the end of the day on Monday. Please note: I look forward to working with you during the paper writing process (see "Discuss work-in-progress" below), but I don't give writing feedback (including thoughts on theses, outlines, and partial drafts) via email.
- Return graded assignments and give feedback in a timely manner. I'll have all relevant papers and assignments graded and returned to you within two weeks of their submission.
- Clarify feedback on written assignments. I'm happy to discuss feedback on any written assignments during office hours.
- Help you improve your writing and discussion skills. Out of respect for your time, I will make every effort to ensure that each assignment and activity contributes to your better understanding of the course material and the development of your analysis, writing, and discussion skills.
- Discuss work-in-progress. When you're writing papers, I encourage you to make an appointment during my office hours to discuss any number of steps in the paper writing process – choosing a topic, formulating a thesis, structuring an argument, etc. Please understand that out of fairness to all students, I cannot read and respond to more than two double-spaced pages of material per assignment. Need more support or a second pair of eyes for written assignments? Check out Harvard's Writing Center, which offers assistance in person and online (<https://writingcenter.fas.edu>).