Science Fiction(al) and Magical Realities

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Description: In recent years, "science fictional" stories and magical realism have enjoyed a surge of popularity among authors and readers alike. These works depict settings that appear familiar, but with a twist; they contain an element of the technologically futuristic, the magical, or the uncanny, and can even bring into question the boundary between fact and fiction. But what accounts for this growing interest in the strange and strangely familiar, and what about our own time draws such fascination about alternate realities? What role can the science fictional or the fantastical play in reexamining history and the present day--or even in preparing or creating new futures?

In this course, we will examine the way science fiction and magical realism expand upon or resist the postmodern literary tradition, commenting upon the normative realities of contemporary society. The first section considers how postcolonial narratives and formalist and structuralist approaches to speculative fictions reflect or destabilize hegemonic histories and epistemologies. Then, in the second unit, we will examine how postcolonialism, gender, sexuality, race, and posthumanism offer a lens for imagining alternative realities. Finally, we end with an investigation into emerging ways of writing about our uncertain present day--metamodernism and hopepunk--that suggest optimism for real-life world(re)building.

Goals: This course will equip you with skills for independent writing and research in literary criticism. The theoretical texts paired with each week's readings are examples of how secondary sources can prove to be indispensable tools to deepen your own reading, and allow you to frame your questions and arguments within the scholarly conversation of which you will partake. The weekly writing assignments and discussions are designed to provide a scaffold for your development as a writer, troubleshoot challenges as a group, and help you discover what methods work best for you.

By the end of this tutorial, you will not only be an efficient researcher and writer, but a scholar with a voice and work which you are proud to contribute. You will be able to:

- ❖ Develop your own research question to enlarge or deepen our understanding of the texts or questions with which we have grappled during the semester
- ❖ Engage with scholarship and theory on your chosen subject, and synthesize it to support your own contribution
- ❖ Learn the nuts and bolts of efficient writing
- ❖ Write a 20-25 page research paper

Required Texts:

Ian McEwan, *Atonement*
Carlos Fuentes, *Aura*
Olga Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*
Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower*
      OR Nnedi Okorafor, *Lagoon*
Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*
Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*
Charles Yu, *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*
Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation*

Course Schedule

Unit 1:

Speculative Fictions and Ways of Knowing

Week 1: **Postmodernism and Metafiction**

Primary reading: Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

Secondary reading:

      Fredric Jameson*,* "Introduction" in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*

      (selections) William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*

      John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion"

Class activity/discussion: modeling the Harvard classroom; discovering your writing and research style

Week 2: **Magical Realism and Postmodern Literature: Beyond the Ironic**

Primary Reading: Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings"; (selections) Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph*; Carlos Fuentes, *Aura*

Secondary Reading:

      Kim Anderson Sasser and Rachael Maribuho, "Pedagogical Magic: Magical Realism's Appeal for the Twenty-First Century Classroom," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Magical Realism in the Twenty-First Century*

Brenda Peynado, "Is Fabulism the New Sincerity?" *LitHub*, May 17, 2021.
https://lithub.com/is-fabulism-the-new-sincerity/

Theo L. D'haen, "Magic Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*

Additional required reading: sample essay

Class activity/discussion: close-reading activity; discussion on effective note-taking and annotations

For next week: begin "reverse engineering/outlining" the sample essay

Week 3: Magical Realism's Remade Histories: The Postcolonial Novel

Primary Reading: Olga Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*

Secondary Reading:

Agnieszka Czyżak, et al., "Looking for a Path of One's Own: The Groundbreaking Role of Olga Tokarczuk's *House of Day, House of Night*."

Stephen Slemon, "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*

P. Gabrielle Foreman, "Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende on Call" in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*

Class activity/discussion: discussing your reverse-engineered sample essay

Week 4: Science Fiction's Alternate Realities: Formalist and Structuralist Approaches

Primary Reading: (selections) Ted Chiang, *Story of Your Life and Others*; (selections) Ken Liu, *The Paper Menagerie*

Secondary Reading:

Sarah Ditum, "'It Drives Writers Mad': Why Are Authors Still Sniffy about Sci-Fi?" *The Guardian*, 18 April 2019.
https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/18/it-drives-writers-mad-why-are-authors-still-sniffy-about-sci-fi

Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Translated

Darko Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition," and "SF and the Novum," in *The Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*

<u>*Optional* reading:</u> Alastair Fowler, "Concepts of Genre," in *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*

<u>Class activity/discussion:</u> research tutorial

Week 5: When Reality Reflects Science Fiction: Technology and Postmodern Society

<u>Primary Works</u>: Charlie Booker, *Black Mirror*, "Nosedive" (2016); Russell T. Davies, *Years and Years*, Season 1, "Episode 1" (2019); Dennis Villeneuve, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)

<u>Secondary Reading:</u>

Chris Weller, "14 Terrifying Predictions from *Black Mirror* that Could Become Reality," *Business Insider*, January 12, 2018, https://www.businessinsider.com/black-mirror-predictions-reality-2016-10#fifteen-million-merits-2

Veronica Hollinger, "Cybernetic Deconstructions: Cyberpunk and Postmodernism"

Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra"

Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society"

Short paper due

Week 6: Choosing Your Text, Choosing Your Topic (no readings)

Use this week's break from assigned readings to study the syllabus, identify the text you want to write on, and read ahead, if we haven't covered the text already.

<u>Class activity/discussion:</u> Choosing a viable research topic

<u>Event:</u> Library Visit

**Unit 2:
Alternate Views of the Present and Future**

Week 7: Enchanted and Cursed Realities: Feminist Retellings of Age Old Tales

<u>Primary Reading:</u> (selections) Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*; (selections) Carmen Maria Machado, *Her Body and Other Parties*; (selections) Kelly Link, *Magic for Beginners*

<u>Secondary Reading</u>:

       Judith Butler, "'Women' as the Subject of Feminism," in *Gender Trouble*

       Jessica Campbell, "Real Women have Skins: The Enchanted Bride Tale in *Her Body and Other Parties*"

       Jeana Jorgensen. "Gender, Sexuality and the Fairy Tale in Contemporary American Literature," in *The Fairy Tale World*

<u>*Optional* viewing:</u> "Angela Carter: Of Wolves and Women," BBC, 2018, https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6vggj3

<u>Class activity/discussion:</u> integrating sources

Week 8: Posthumanism and Non-Human Storytellers: A New Vision of the Human

<u>Primary Works:</u> Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*

<u>Secondary Reading:</u>

       Lars Bernaerts, et al., "The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators"

       Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"

       N. Katherine Hayles, "Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers"

Class activity/discussion: writing the introduction

Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography due

Week 9: Afrofuturism: Race and the Construction of Alternate Futures

<u>Primary Reading:</u> Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower*, OR Nnedi Okorafor, *Lagoon*

<u>Secondary Reading:</u>

Lydie Moudileno, "Magical Realism, Afrofuturism, and (Afro)Surrealism: The Entanglement of Categories in African Fiction," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Magical Realism in the Twenty-First Century*

Kodwo Eshun. "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism"

Samuel R. Delany, "The Mirror of Afrofuturism"

Dann J. Broyld, "The Underground Railroad as Afrofuturism: Enslaved Blacks Who Imagined a Future and Used Technology to Reach the 'Outer Spaces of Slavery'"

Optional listening and reading:

"We Are in the Future," *This American Life*, August 18, 2017
https://www.thisamericanlife.org/623/we-are-in-the-future-2017

Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose"
https://www.kit.ntnu.no/sites/www.kit.ntnu.no/files/Black%20to%20the%20Future%20%28Dery%29_0.pdf

Additional required reading: sample essay 2

Week 10: Queering Utopian Communities in Space

Primary Works: Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Secondary Reading:

Wendy Pearson, "Alien Cryptographies: The View from Queer"

De Witt Douglas Kilgore, "Queering the Coming Race? A Utopian Historical Perspective"

Class activity/discussion: giving and receiving feedback on writing

Draft due

Week 11: Draft workshop (no readings this week)

Unit 3:

New Ways of Responding to Troubled Futures

Week 12: Metamodernism: Thinking Beyond the End of History

<u>Primary Works:</u> Charles Yu, *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe;* Guido van der Werve, "Everything is Going to Be Alright (2007),
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5366DD9JauU

<u>Secondary Works:</u>

(Dir.) Jörg Heiser, "What is Metamodernism?" (2014),
https://www.frieze.com/video/what-metamodernism

Sarah Helen Binney, "Oscillating Towards the Sublime," Notes on Metamodernism, April 2, 2015, http://www.metamodernism.com/2015/04/02/oscillating-towards-the-sublime-2

Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on metamodernism"

Luke Turner, "Metamodernist Manifesto," *Metamodernist Manifesto*, 2011.
http://www.metamodernism.org/

<u>*Optional* viewing:</u> "How Rick and Morty Caught the Zeitgeist," *The Take*, June 2, 2018.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEh4DQG4gNw

<u>Class activity/discussion:</u> maintaining healthy productivity at the end of the semester

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Week 13: Hopepunk: Storytelling and Resilience in the Anthropocene

<u>Primary Reading:</u> Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation*

<u>Secondary Reading:</u>

Aja Romano, "Hopepunk, the Latest Storytelling Trend, Is All About Weaponized Optimism," *Vox*, December 27, 2018
https://www.vox.com/2018/12/27/18137571/what-is-hopepunk-noblebright-grimdark

Alyssa Hull, "Hopepunk and Solarpunk: On Climate Narratives That Go Beyond the Apocalypse," *LitHub*, November 22, 2019,
https://lithub.com/hopepunk-and-solarpunk-on-climate-narratives-that-go-beyond-the-apocalypse/

Italo Calvino, "Lightness," in *Six Mementos for the Next Millennium*
https://zerogravity.empac.rpi.edu/lightness/

(selections) Donna Haraway, "Sympoiesis: Symbiogenesis and the Lively Arts of Staying with the Trouble," in *Staying with the Trouble*

<u>*Optional* Listening and Reading:</u>

"Do Get Your Hopes Up… Rocking Out With Hopepunk"
https://www.npr.org/2018/12/10/675343267/do-get-your-hopes-up-rocking-out-with-hope-punk
NPR, 1A podcast, December 10, 2018

Lee Konstantinou, "Something Is Broken in Our Science Fiction, Slate, Jan 15, 2019,
https://slate.com/technology/2019/01/hopepunk-cyberpunk-solarpunk-science-fiction-broken.html

5-minute conference presentations

<u>Reading Period</u>

Final Paper due TBA
Final Conference Presentations TBA

Assignments

- ❖ **Short Essay** (5 pages) (10%)
- ❖ **Prospectus & Annotated Bibliography** (15%)
- ❖ **Drafts** (15%)
- ❖ **Final Paper** (20-25 pages) (40%)
- ❖ **Participation & Preparation** (20%)
- ❖ **Conference Presentation** (ungraded)

Course Policies

<u>Inclusion and Accessibility:</u> The primary principle for success in any learning environment is that of respect: for each other and the work we produce, and the means we conduct ourselves in relationship to our fellow researchers and research. In the course of this tutorial, we may encounter material that is new to us: it may take us by surprise or raise difficult questions. Some of this material might be in the texts we read, and others might be in the words of our peers. I encourage open conversations that confront, rather than side-step, these difficult topics. By agreeing to discuss and critique this content in a way that is both respectful and constructive, we can create a welcoming and robust learning environment that grows *with* us. As the instructor of the course, I

will do my part to flag potentially unsettling material that you may want to discuss with me beforehand, while also realizing that what is "problematic" for me may be different for you. Having conversations about these subjects can aid us in developing a model for future conduct in the university that is inclusive and sensitive.

Academic Honesty: Plagiarism is the use of another person's ideas or writing without giving them proper credit. In the Information Age, our ideas are one of our greatest sources of power, and we deserve to be credited even as we give credit; to empower others as our ideas empower us. Rearranging someone else's words as a "paraphrase" is plagiarism because it generates no idea of its own, but recycles another writer's intellectual labor. The consequences of plagiarism can range from failing an assignment to dismissal from the course, or even more serious actions.

By familiarizing yourself with Harvard FAS's Honor Code, you can begin to use information responsibly and intentionally: *"Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs."*

Collaboration: Today more than ever, learning the skills of collaboration are important to success in the university and beyond. I encourage you to turn to your fellow students as your teammates, fellow brainstormers, and peer reviewers. However, note that the work you turn in under your name must be your own, and input from collaborators must be cited.

Attendance: In courses the size of our tutorial, each student's attendance counts: we are a team. You learn from your peers as much as they learn from you, which is why attendance at all of our meetings and events is required. However, I understand that life frustrates even our most earnest attempts to be avid learners, so I offer everyone a "free" absence without explanation. More than one absence, however, will harm your participation grade, and an overall pattern of absence, tardiness, and poor participation could be grounds for failing the course. This is not because I want to penalize you, but because you will have missed out on the opportunity to adequately equip yourself to successfully produce the kind of research project this course requires. Please email me in a timely manner to communicate any events or information that might prevent your full participation, and we will have a conversation about it.

Due Dates & Late Grades: Unless otherwise specified, assignments are due by 5:00pm on the date listed in the schedule. Late assignments will be docked 1/3 letter grade per day late, except for the final paper, which must be turned in before the due date. Students failing to turn in a final paper, or turning it in late without an official excuse, will fail the tutorial. I am happy to grant extensions if given advance notice, preferably a few days ahead of the assignment, but no less than 24 hours.

Laptops: Laptops are permitted in class, and the use of iPads/tablets is encouraged. However, please practice courtesy to yourself and others by limiting your laptop use to course-related notetaking and searches only.

Email: I will use email and Canvas to distribute important info throughout the semester—from emailing you handouts to adjusting assignments and deadlines. To help us develop a healthy relationship to our email accounts, I will send material and announcements on Mondays, and only email outside of that time to notify you of any *crucial* last minute information (e.g. sudden campus closure). If you have a question that you need to ask me by email, be sure to give me at least 24 hours, or you may not get a response until it's too late. Also, please let me know if you'd like to use a non-Harvard email address.

Accommodations for students with disabilities: Accommodating students is part of Harvard policy, and I will work with you to make sure you can participate fully in our course. Please familiarize yourself with the related policy: *"Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the <u>Accessible Education Office</u> (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term,* **(DATE)***. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation."*