Science Fiction

http://sf-f13.blogs.rutgers.edu

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MTH 2 (Mondays and Thursdays, 9:50-11:10 a.m.) in Scott 214
Office hours: Mondays 3–5 p.m. in Murray 031 or by appointment

Overview

This course is a study in the history of science fiction from its nineteenth-century precursors to the present. The course pays special attention to the oscillations of the genre’s status, from respectable work of the imagination (“speculative fiction”) to despised escapist entertainment (“pulp”) and back, before becoming a spectrum of subgenres (cyberpunk, weird, “literary,” etc.). The interpretation of science fiction texts is thus set within the history of science fiction readers, publishers, and writers, from the earliest SF pulps to massive “convergence culture” science fiction that straddles books, film, TV, and internet fandom. Readings include SF (or pre-SF) short stories by authors from H.G. Wells and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain to Octavia Butler and William Gibson, as well as novels by Pohl and Kornbluth, Ursula Le Guin, and Amitav Ghosh. Some readings in relevant scholarship and tvtropes.org. The course format is mixed lecture and discussion. Three papers, regular informal writing.

Learning Goals

1. Gain a broad understanding of the history of English-language science fiction literature since 1890 in terms of its diverse forms, themes, and publication media.
2. Develop the ability to analyze individual or multiple science-fiction texts in terms of key concepts including genre, implied audience, plot construction, linguistic texture, authorial identity, publication context, and sociocultural context.
3. Enter a scholarly conversation about the definitions, evolution, and purpose of the science-fiction genre.
4. Gain proficiency in writing detailed scholarly arguments about texts by focusing on the specific problems of the science-fiction genre.

Requirements

10% Class participation

Your learning in this course depends on your engaged participation. To receive credit for class participation, you must arrive on time and prepared for class, and you must engage regularly in
discussion through both thoughtful speech and attentive listening. Repeated lateness, lack of preparation, or disruptive activity will be counted as an absence.

The grading scale for participation is: two or fewer absences or equivalent, 4.0; three absences, 3.0; four absences, 2.0; five or more absences, 0.

10% Informal writing

The required informal writing will consist of five short entries in a student blog. The class will be randomly divided into two groups, who will take turns blogging. Blog entries will regularly be due on Sunday evenings, as indicated on the syllabus. Each individual entry is graded on a pass-fail basis. The grading scale for work on the blog is: no more than one entry missing or late, 4.0; two entries missing, 3.0; three entries missing, 2.0; four missing, 0.

20% Paper 1 (5 pp.)

A focused analysis of a single text.

20% Paper 2 (6 pp.)

A comparative analysis of two texts.

40% Paper 3 (8–10 pp.)

A longer argument, in lieu of a final exam. Requires some outside reading in secondary sources.

Grading policies

No incompletes

Except for reasons of documented serious illness at term end, disability, or other major extenuating circumstance, I will not assign “incomplete” or T grades. If you do not complete all three papers in time for me to submit your final grades, you will receive a grade of F. There can be no extensions on the final paper.

Late papers

One of the first two papers may be turned in up to three days late without penalty. The other paper must then be on time. Past these deadlines, the rate of penalty is 0.4 points per day, with no fractional penalties.

Grading standards

Grades will be given on the four-point scale as specified in the Undergraduate Catalog. For converting the final score to a letter, each numerical equivalent in the Catalog will be taken as the maximum of an interval open on the left and closed on the right. Thus A corresponds to scores
strictly greater than 3.5 and less than or equal to 4.0, B+ to scores greater than 3.0 and less than or equal to 3.5, B to scores greater than 2.5 and less than or equal to 3.0, and so on. There are no “minus” grades.

A (3.5, 4.0]: Outstanding. The student’s work demonstrates thorough mastery of course materials and skills.

B/B+ (2.5, 3.5]: Good. The student’s work demonstrates serious engagement with all aspects of the course but incomplete mastery of course materials and skills.

C/C+ (1.5, 2.5]: Satisfactory. The student’s work satisfies requirements but shows significant problems or major gaps in mastery of course material.

D (0.5, 1.5]: Poor or minimal pass. The student completes the basic course requirements, but the student’s work is frequently unsatisfactory in several major areas.

F [0, 0.5]: Failure. Student has not completed all course requirements or turns in consistently unsatisfactory work.

**Academic integrity**

We, the students and the instructor, have a duty to each other and to our community to abide by norms of academic honesty and responsibility. To present something as your own original writing when it is not is plagiarism. Plagiarism and other forms of cheating are serious violations of trust. Academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, will have severe consequences, in accordance with the University Policy on Academic Integrity and the Code of Student Conduct. For details about the University’s academic integrity policies, please see academicintegrity.rutgers.edu.

**Students with disabilities**

All reasonable accommodation will be given to students with disabilities. Students who may require accommodation should speak with me at the start of the semester. You may also contact the Office of Disability Services (disabilityservices.rutgers.edu; 848-445-6800).
Schedule

I. Starting points

Thursday, September 5.
Introduction.

(Sunday, September 8.) Blog entry: trial run. Both groups.

Monday, September 9.

Wells, “The Star.” Try to ignore the Wesleyan Anthology headnotes (spoilers).
Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, “Sultana’s Dream.”

Thursday, September 12.

Gernsback, “A New Sort of Magazine.”
Gelder, Popular Fiction.
TV Tropes, s.v. “Science Fiction.”

II. Early pulps

(Sunday, September 15.) Blog entry: the medium of pulp. Group 1.

Monday, September 16.

All paratexts in Amazing Stories 1, no. 1.
Gernsback, “Thank you!”
Wertenbaker, “The Man From the Atom” (read both parts).
Poe, “Mesmeric Revelation.”

Thursday, September 19.

Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu.”
Browse: Weird Tales 28, nos. 2 and 3.
Paper 1 assignment distributed.

(Sunday, September 22.) Blog entry: taking it seriously. Group 2.

Monday, September 23.

Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space.”
Recommended: Sorensen, “A Weird Modernist Archive.”
Thursday, September 26.

Hamilton, “The Man Who Evolved” (*Wesleyan Anthology*). Compare the magazine version (see below, under Readings).


Recommended: Moore, “Shambleau.”

(Sunday, September 29.) No blog entry required.

III. The Golden Age

Monday, September 30.

Asimov, “Reason.”

Bradbury, “There Will Come Soft Rains” (subsequently part of *The Martian Chronicles*).

Sturgeon, “Thunder and Roses.”

(Wednesday, October 2.) Paper 1 due (5 pp.).

Thursday, October 3.


Selected contemporary mainstream-press materials (online).

(Sunday, October 6.) Blog entry: SF and insiders. Group 1.

Monday, October 7.


Thursday, October 10.


(Sunday, October 13.) Blog entry: a (small) example of critique. Group 2.

Monday, October 14.

Pohl and Kornbluth, *The Space Merchants*, complete.

IV. The New Wave

Thursday, October 17.

(Sunday, October 20.) Blog entry: Ballard vs. Ballard. Group 1.

Monday, October 21.
Dick, “We Can Remember It for You Wholesale.”
Ellison, “’Repent, Harlequin!’ Said the Ticktockman.”

Thursday, October 24.

(Sunday, October 27.) Blog entry: On style. Group 2.

Monday, October 28.

Thursday, October 31.
Paper 2 assignment distributed (boo!).

(Sunday, November 3.) Blog entry: On *The Left Hand on TV Tropes*. Group 1.

Monday, November 4.
Jameson, “World Reduction in Le Guin.”

Thursday, November 7.
Zoline, “The Heat Death of the Universe.”
Russ, “When It Changed.”

(Sunday, November 10.) Blog entry: Thinking across media. Group 2.

Monday, November 11.
Tangent: the moving image.
Jenkins, “*Star Trek* Rerun, Reread, Rewritten.”
Goldstone, “Where No Man Has Gone Before.”

Thursday, November 14.
Lem, “The Seventh Voyage.”
Lem, “How Microx and Gigant Made the Universe Expand.”
(Sunday, November 17.) No blog entry required.

Monday, November 18.
Aldiss, “Super-Toys Last All Summer Long.”
Herbert, “Seed Stock.”

(Wednesday, November 20.) Paper 2 due (6 pp.).

Thursday, November 21
Delany, “Aye, and Gomorrah….”

V. Cyberpunk to the present

(Sunday, November 24.) Blog entry: Are you in cyberspace? Group 1.

Monday, November 25.
Gibson, “Burning Chrome.”
Gibson, “Time Machine Cuba.”
Gibson, “Will We Plug Computers into our Brains?”

Tuesday, November 26. (Thursday classes meet today.)
Hayles, “Toward Embodied Virtuality.”
Butler, “Speech Sounds.”

(Thursday, November 28. Thanksgiving recess.)

(Sunday, December 1.) No blog entry required.

Monday, December 2.
Final paper assignment distributed; two outside sources required.

Thursday, December 5.

(Sunday, December 8.) Blog entry: draw a historical line. Group 2.

Monday, December 9.
Ghosh, The Calcutta Chromosome, complete.
Wrap-up and retrospect.
(Thursday, December 12. Reading day; no class.)

Last day to make arrangements to submit the final paper electronically.

(December 16–23. Exam period.)

Monday, December 23. Final paper (8–10 pp.) due at 11 a.m.

Readings

ISBNs are included to help students ordering books online.

Aldiss, Brian W. “Super-Toys Last All Summer Long.” In Evans et al., The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction, 444–51.

Asimov, Isaac. “Reason.” In Evans et al., The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction, 161–76.


Butler, Octavia E. “Speech Sounds.” In Evans et al., The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction, 567–79.


Dick, Philip K. “We Can Remember It for You Wholesale.” In Evans et al., The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction, 386–404.

Ellison, Harlan. “‘Repent, Harlequin!’ Said the Ticktockman.” In Evans et al., The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction, 367–78.


Goldstone, James, dir. “Where No Man Has Gone Before.” *Star Trek*. Aired September 22, 1966. 2007. The DVD is on reserve at Douglass Media Center. Alternatively, streaming video is available for purchase on Amazon or free, with ads, on *hulu*.


Herbert, Frank. “Seed Stock.” In Evans et al., *The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction*, 478–89.


**Acknowledgments**

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