

CMLIT 122: Global Science Fiction

Spring 2018

Elec Eng West 201

Tue/Thu 12:05 - 1:20

Professor Grant Wythoff

(gxw63@psu.edu)

Office Hours Tue 2:00 - 3:00

317 Pattee Library

Course site:

<https://gwythoff.github.io/globalSF>



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[Skip to the schedule...](#)

Description

This class will introduce students to the history and poetics of science fiction (SF). Our focus will be international, surveying the global production of speculative narratives in several languages (all translated into English). Each of the novels—and some comics—we will read in the first portion of the course represent a pivotal moment in the development of the genre: from nineteenth-century utopian precursors, to pulp magazines, to the postwar Golden Age, to New Wave explorations of race, gender, and sexuality. The remainder of the course will survey contemporary SF from around the globe, with a particular focus first on urban narratives, and then on other worlds.

Our reading will be guided by an attention to the specific frames of reference that a work of SF demands: the reader of SF must continuously triangulate the relationship between her world and the world of the text, and she must remain open to polyvalent interpretations of terms and concepts that take on new meaning in alternate universes. How do works of SF elicit this form of critical literacy, and how might it be usefully applied to other kinds of texts and experiences?

Required Books

- Samuel R. Delany, *Trouble on Triton* (1976)
- Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (1993)
- Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl* (2008)
- Cixin Liu, *The Three-Body Problem* (2008)
- Lauren Beukes, *Zoo City* (2010)
- Lavie Tidhar, *Central Station* (2010)
- Kim Stanley Robinson, *2312* (2012)
- Nnendi Okorafor, *Binti* (2015)

Optional Film Screenings

I've arranged to have the Immersive Environments Lab in the School of Architecture available to our class this semester for some film screenings. Details to follow. Just know that I'll be showing a handful of science fiction films on weekday evenings (so that more students can attend), and extra credit will be in order for attendance. Shortlist includes:

- *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* (dir. Byron Haskin, 1964)
- *World on a Wire* (dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1973)
- *Scanners* (dir. David Cronenberg, 1981)
- *Akira* (dir. Katsuhiro Ôtomo, 1988)
- *Children of Men* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2006)
- *Sleep Dealer* (dir. Alex Rivera, 2008)
- *Blade Runner 2049* (dir. Denis Villeneuve, 2017)

Grade breakdown

28% participation

Class participation on all fronts is vital to the success of this course. Simply attending class will not be enough to earn full credit. Instead, you must be an active participant, someone who comes prepared and engages with all aspects of the class. Your total participation grade will encompass a) bringing your book or

printed pdf to class on the date assigned, b) active contributions to discussions, and c) occasional reading quizzes.

24% reports on real-world novums (four)

It has become a truism that the real world seems to have finally caught up with science fiction: technologies that are now mundane parts of our everyday lives (satellite GPS, biometrics, augmented reality) were once the genre's wildest dreams. But what does it mean when we experience something (a news story, a new piece of technology, a world event) as feeling "like science fiction?"

Four times throughout the semester, you will report on a real-world "novum" (SF critic Darko Suvin's term for a novelty or innovation) that *feels* like science fiction. Your short piece should consist of three paragraphs describing the novum and reflecting on the lessons and questions it offers for the way we live today with technology, with the changing environment, and with one another. The purpose of these exercises is to see what happens when we apply the critical questions of science fiction studies to our everyday lives.

24% short essays (two)

Two short critical essays will be assigned, each focusing on one novel from our readings. Both essays will run 5 double-spaced pages each (~1500 words). Further instruction will be provided.

24% speculative design final project

For your final project, you will "re-design" an existing technology, infrastructure, or social form. These interventions can range from micro-level (e.g. proposing a particular tweak to the infrastructure of the Internet and tracing its consequences) to whole-cloth (e.g. envisioning an alternate communication system). You will situate this re-design among the novels we have read, using the texts to help imagine the structure implications of your re-design. The final form of this assignment will be a paper of 5 to 7 pages, properly referenced, and with additional media as necessary or desired. Virtually any medium could work: paper prototypes, clay, painting, video, etc. You will additionally give an informal presentation of your re-design to the class.

Administrivia

Attendance and Deadlines

While I do not advocate missing any classes, I realize that you may face unpredictable circumstances once or twice throughout the term. For this reason, you may miss two classes this semester without penalty. Additional absences will impact your final grade. Each additional absence will lower your final grade by half a letter. No extensions will be given on assignment deadlines except in

extreme (and verifiable) circumstances. These circumstances include reasons of health and extenuating circumstances, such as death of a family member.

Laptop Policy

Laptops are allowed in the classroom, but we will put them away for specific periods of time during instruction (i.e. group discussions). When your laptop *is* open during allotted periods of time (i.e. lectures or writing assignments), be sure to practice good screen etiquette: keep it to the side and don't stare too long. Cellphones are not permitted during class.

Academic Integrity

Penn State defines academic integrity as the pursuit of scholarly activity in an open, honest and responsible manner. All students should act with personal integrity, respect other students' dignity, rights and property, and help create and maintain an environment in which all can succeed through the fruits of their efforts (Faculty Senate Policy 49-20).

Dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated in this course. Dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarizing, fabricating information or citations, facilitating acts of academic dishonesty by others, having unauthorized possession of examinations, submitting work of another person or work previously used without informing the instructor, or tampering with the academic work of other students. Students who are found to be dishonest will receive academic sanctions and will be reported to the University's Judicial Affairs office for possible further disciplinary sanction.

Counseling and Physiological Services

Many students at Penn State face personal challenges or have psychological needs that may interfere with their academic progress, social development, or emotional wellbeing. The university offers a variety of confidential services to help you through difficult times, including individual and group counseling, crisis intervention, consultations, online chats, and mental health screenings. These services are provided by staff who welcome all students and embrace a philosophy respectful of clients' cultural and religious backgrounds, and sensitive to differences in race, ability, gender identity and sexual orientation. [Counseling and Psychological Services at University Park \(CAPS\)](#): 814-863- 0395; Counseling and Psychological Services at [Commonwealth Campuses](#); Penn State Crisis Line (24 hours/7 days/week): 877-229- 6400; Crisis Text Line (24 hours/7 days/week): Text LIONS to 741741

Equal Access

Penn State encourages qualified people with disabilities to participate in its programs and activities and is committed to the policy that all people shall have equal access to programs, facilities, and admissions without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by state or federal authorities. If you anticipate needing any type of accommodation in this course or have questions about physical access, please tell me as soon as possible.

Schedule

Weeks 1 - 2: How to Read SF

Tue Jan 9

- Introductions and overview of course

Thu Jan 11

- Lecture: a critical toolkit for SF
- intro to Octavia Butler

Tue Jan 16 & Thu Jan 19

- Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (1993)

Weeks 3 - 6: Histories of SF

Pulp Origins

Tue Jan 23

- Hugo Gernsback, “[A New Sort of Magazine](#)” (1926)
- Stanley Weinbaum, “[A Martian Odyssey](#)” (1934)
 - also page through [the July 1934 issue of *Wonder Stories*](#) in which the Weinbaum story first appeared

Thu Jan 25

- C.L. Moore, “[Shambleau](#)” (1933)
– also page through the [November 1933 issue of *Weird Tales*](#)

The Golden Age**Tue Jan 30**

- stories TBD

Thu Feb 1

- stories TBD

The New Wave**Tue Feb 6 & Thu Feb 8**

- Samuel R. Delany, *Trouble on Triton* (1976)
- *Group A visits special collections on Tuesday*

Tue Feb 13 & Thu Feb 15

- Delany, cont'd
- *Group B visits special collections on Tuesday*

Weeks 7 - 9: Urban Futures**Tel Aviv****Tue Feb 20 & Thu Feb 22**

- Lavie Tidhar, *Central Station* (2010)

Bangkok**Tue Feb 27 & Thu Mar 1**

- Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl* (2008)

MARCH 5–11 SPRING BREAK

Johannesburg

Tue Mar 13 & Thu Mar 15

- Lauren Beukes, *Zoo City* (2010)

Week 10 - 15: Other Worlds

Cixin Liu

Tue Mar 20 & Thu Mar 22

- Cixin Liu, *The Three-Body Problem* (2008)

Tue Mar 27 & Thu Mar 29

- Liu, cont'd

Interlude: Some Comics

Tue Apr 3 & Thu Apr 5

Readings TBD, could include:

- [FRANCE] Alejandro Jodorowsky and Moebius, *The Incal* (1981)
- [BELGIUM] Benoit Peeters and Francois Schuiten, *The Leaning Girl* (The Obscure Cities) (1996)
- [CANADA] Jeff Lemire and Dustin Nguyen, *Descender* (2015)
- [CANADA] Jeff Lemire, *Trillium* (2013)

Kim Stanley Robinson

Tue Apr 10 & Thu Apr 12

- Kim Stanley Robinson, *2312* (2012)

Tue Apr 17 & Thu Apr 19

- Robinson, cont'd

Nnendi Okorafor**Tue Apr 24 & Thu 26**

- Nnendi Okorafor, *Binti* (2015)

Acknowledgments

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