Science Fiction

Module Convenors: Dr Caroline Edwards & Dr Joe Brooker
Module Level: BA Level 6 (optional module)
Time: Wednesdays 6-7.20pm, 2014-15

Module description
This module introduces students to some of the key concepts and methodological approaches used in the contemporary study of science fiction (SF). SF is understood inclusively, as a capacious genre overlapping at times with fantasy, utopian/dystopian literature, Gothic, satire, speculative fiction, and the alternate mappings of literary history offered by modernism or postmodernism. Focusing on its development throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, we will consider the ways in which SF has evolved: in particular in the novel and the short story, but also at times invoking other forms such as drama and film. We will be drawing on a range of critical approaches through which to explore some of the defining interests of SF literature and to reflect upon its critical reception in secondary literature.

Module aims and objectives

- To develop understanding of debates about genre. What is ‘genre fiction’? What distinctions or hierarchies are established between ‘literary’ and ‘genre’ texts? How have our understandings of SF as a genre changed over the last century?
- To become familiar with recurring tropes such as robots, space exploration, genetic engineering, dystopian futures and (post-) apocalyptic worlds.
- To explore ways that Science Fiction has acted as a social commentary on contemporary society.
- To gain an understanding of how Science Fiction has explored ideas including parallel worlds, alternate histories and different models of time and reality.
- To gain knowledge of diverse critical approaches to SF, including those from Marxism, structuralism, gender studies, postcolonial theory, cultural history, adaptation studies, ecocriticism and utopianism / dystopianism.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Identify and discuss the key literary texts, generic forms and thematic issues in modern SF
• Offer close textual analysis, paying attention to use of language, form, narrative structure and ideology
• Evaluate the conception and use of ‘genre’ within literary studies
• Reflect upon some of the key theoretical frameworks through which SF texts are studied in secondary literature
• Demonstrate an awareness of the development of scholarly studies in SF and the range of methodological approaches to SF texts
• Research, develop and present ideas effectively in written form
• Articulate orally an informed understanding of the relationship between SF texts and their social, cultural and political contexts
• Analyse and assess the work of a range of writers

Please note: there are some long texts on this course. Please be aware of this when planning your time and read as many texts as possible before the course begins, and ensure all texts are read before the relevant seminars.

Primary Texts
Unless otherwise stated, it is your responsibility to acquire copies of the following set texts. Whilst the library will stock all of these, copies are limited and purchasing your own texts is advisable.

Several of the shorter texts studied on this course appear in the Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction (2010), which students must purchase. All short stories available in the Wesleyan anthology are marked below with ***.

Jules Verne, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea (1870)
H. G. Wells, The War of the Worlds (1898)
E. M. Forster, The Machine Stops (1909)***
John W. Campbell, ‘The Last Evolution’ (1932) [available on Moodle]
Karel Čapek, Rossum’s Universal Robots (1920)
Joanna Russ, The Female Man (1975)
Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid’s Tale (1985)
Brian Aldiss, Non-Stop (1958)
Clare Winger Harris, ‘The Fate of the Poseidonia’ (1927) [available on Moodle]
Judith Merril, ‘That Only a Mother’ (1948)***
Judith Merril, ‘Stormy Weather’ (1954) [available on Moodle]
Frederik Pohl, ‘The Tunnel Under the World’ (1953) [available on Moodle]
--- ‘Day Million’ (1966)***
Robert Sheckley, ‘Specialist’ (1953)***
Ray Bradbury, Farenheit 451 (1953)
--- ‘We Can Remember It For You Wholesale’ (1966)***
Philip K. Dick, Ubik (1969)
--- ‘The Voices of Time’ (1962) [available on Moodle]
Pamela Zoline, ‘The Heat Death of the Universe’ (1967)***
--- *Neuromancer* (1983)

Pat Cadigan, ‘Pretty Boy Credo’ (1986)***


Octavia Butler, ‘Speech Sounds’ (1983)***
--- *Dawn* (1987)


-- Seminar Schedule --

**AUTUMN TERM 2014**

**Week 1**  
**Introduction: Defining SF & Genre Debates [JB & CE]**


**Week 2**  
**Origins I: Voyages Extraordinaires [CE]**

Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870)

**Week 3**  
**Origins II: The Scientific Romance [CE]**

H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (1898)

**Week 4**  
**Technological Anxieties I: The Cybernetic Imagination [CE]**


John W. Campbell, ‘The Last Evolution’ (1932) [available on Moodle]

**Week 5**  
**Technological Anxieties II: Robot Rebellions [CE]**

Karel Čapek, *Rossum’s Universal Robots* (1920)

**Week 6**  
**Reading Week – no class**

**Week 7**  
**Galactic Encounters I: The Space Opera [CE]**

Brian Aldiss, *Non-Stop* (1958)

**Week 8**  
**Galactic Encounters II: Queering Sexuality in Space [CE]**


**Week 9**
Critical Utopias: Feminism, Ecology and the New Left [CE]
Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (1975)

Week 10
Critical Dystopias: The Shadow of Thatcher and Reagan [CE]
Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985)

Week 11
Reflections on Science Fiction Scholarship [JB & CE]
Fredric Jameson, ‘Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?’ *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1982) [available on Science Fiction Studies website: http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/27/jameson.html]

SPRING TERM 2015

Week 1
Women Writers and the SF Short Story [JB]
Clare Winger Harris, ‘The Fate of the Poseidonia’ (1927) [available on Moodle]
Judith Merrill, ‘That Only a Mother’ (1948)***
Judith Merrill, ‘Stormy Weather’ (1954) [available on Moodle]

Week 2
Golden Age Satire & Social Criticism: 1 [JB]
Frederik Pohl, ‘The Tunnel Under the World’ (1953) [available on Moodle]
--- ‘Day Million’ (1966)***
Robert Sheckley, ‘Specialist’ (1953)***

Week 3
Golden Age Satire & Social Criticism: 2 [JB]
Ray Bradbury, *Farenheit 451* (1953)

Week 4
Philip K. Dick & the Paranoid Imagination: 1 [JB]
--- ‘We Can Remember It For You Wholesale’ (1966)***

Week 5
Philip K. Dick & the Paranoid Imagination: 2 [JB]

Reading week – no class

Week 7
The New Wave [JB]
--- ‘The Voices of Time’ (1962) [available on Moodle]  
Pamela Zoline, ‘The Heat Death of the Universe’ (1967)***

**Week 8**  
**Cyberpunk: 1 [JB]**  
--- *Neuromancer* (1983)

**Week 9**  
**Cyberpunk: 2 [JB]**  
Pat Cadigan, ‘Pretty Boy Credo’ (1986)***  

**Week 10**  
**Octavia Butler & the Politics of Embodiment [JB]**  
Octavia Butler, ‘Speech Sounds’ (1983)***  
--- *Dawn* (1987)

**Week 11**  
**Genre Blend [JB]**  

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**SUMMER TERM 2015**

**Week 1**  
**Guest Panel Discussion**  
Featuring invited speakers with expertise in science fiction.

**Week 2**  
**Drop-in Tutorials on Essay Planning [JB & CE]**

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**Assessment**

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Please see the separate handouts (posted on Moodle) for details about coursework and assessed essays.
Secondary reading

We have digitized two introductory pieces on the genre of science fiction that offer a clear and engaging starting point for secondary research on this topic (see the set readings for Week 1 of the Autumn Term); these texts can be found on Moodle – do have a look!

Atwood, Margaret. *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (London: Virago, 2011)
Bould, Mark, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint. *Fifty Key Figures in Science Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2009)
Hassler, Donald M. and Clyde Wilcox (eds). *Political Science Fiction* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1997)
Kerslake, Patricia. *Science Fiction and Empire* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2007)


Moylan, Tom. *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York: Methuen, 1986)


Pordzik, Ralph (ed). *Futurescapes: Space in Utopian and Science Fiction Discourses* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009)

Pordzik, Ralph. *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia: A Comparative Introduction to the Utopian Novel in the New English Literatures* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001)


Sawyer, Andy and David Seed (eds). *Speaking Science Fiction: Dialogues and Interpretations* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2000)

**Journals:**
Both of the following journals are available via Birkbeck’s e-Journals portal on the library homepage.

*Science Fiction Studies*
*Extrapolation*