

Science Fiction as Media Theory

Wednesdays 2:00-4:50

ASCJ

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This class explores the ways that science fiction—sometimes known as speculative fiction—has historically functioned as a form of vernacular theory about media technologies, practices, and institutions. As recent writings about “design fictions” illustrate, these speculations have in turn inspired the developers and of new technologies as well as those who create content for such platforms, helping to frame our expectations about the nature of media change. And, increasingly, media theorists—raised in a culture where science fiction has been a pervasive influence—are drawing on its metaphors as they speculate about virtual worlds, cyborg feminism, post-humanism, and afro-futurism, among a range of other topics.

This seminar will explore the multiple intersections between science fiction and media theory, reading literary and filmic fictions as theoretical speculations and classic and contemporary theory as forms of science fiction. The scope of the course ranges from technological Utopian writers from the early 20th century to contemporary imaginings of digital futures and steampunk pasts. Not simply a course on science fiction as a genre, this seminar will invite us to explore what kinds of cultural work science fiction performs and how it has contributed to larger debates about communication and culture.

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

- describe the historic relationship between speculative fiction and media theory
- explain key movements in science fiction, such as technological utopianism, cyberpunk, steampunk, and discuss their relationship to larger theories of media change.
- trace the roots of contemporary media theories of cyborg feminism, afrofuturism, and trans/post-humanism, back through science fiction films and literature
- develop their own critical account of how ideas about media and technology have been shaped by the discourses associated with science fiction.

Required Books:

Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

Frederik Pohl and Cyril M. Kornbluth, *The Space Merchants*

Pat Cadigan, *Mindplayers*

Cory Doctorow, *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*

Vernor Vinge, *Rainbow's End*

Nalo Hopkinson and Upphinder Mehan (eds.), *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and*

Fantasy

Dexter Palmer, *The Dream of Perpetual Motion*

All other readings can be found on the class Blackboard site.

Assignments:

1. Blackboard Posts: Each week, students will post a reaction to the readings via the class blackboard site. The reaction might be a comment, a question, a provocation, and often will be a complex mixture of all of the above. It can be informal and need not be more than a few paragraphs, but it should show the student's thinking process in response to the topics and materials being encountered that week. This is the primary mechanism by which I will be monitoring your mastery of the core concepts of the class. You need not respond to every reading each week, but there should be signs there of close reading and critical engagement. **(30 percent)**

2. Media Analysis Paper: Applying the concepts of science fiction as a "design platform" that we will encounter in the first class session, students will choose a film, television series, or game which they feel offers a particularly vivid embodiment of a science fiction concept and provide an analysis which considers the thinking behind this representation of future media or technology, the ways this concept gets deployed through the story and the values which become associated with it, and how this concept may be deployed as a springboard for creative thinking about the development of future media tools, platforms, or processes. Along the way, students might consider the differences between embodying these concepts in an audio-visual media as opposed to the ways they might be dealt with in a literary text. The result should be a short but impactful essay (roughly 5-7 pages). **(20 percent)**

3. Theory Analysis Paper: A key theme in our discussions has been the idea that science fiction functions much like theory to speculate about the implications of current social, economic, political, cultural, or technological practices and to envision potential outcomes of current trends. In this paper, students will reverse their lens and examine theory as a form of speculative fiction. Students will select a work of media theory and discuss what they see as its vision for the future (whether implicit or explicit). What does it have to say about the nature of media change? Does it see people as moving towards a utopian or dystopian future? What, if any, explicit use does it make of metaphors drawn from science fiction as it constructs its vision for the future? What kinds of response does it seek from its readers to the problems or potentials that it has identified? Students shall produce a short, impactful essay (5-7 pages) which demonstrates close reading of the theoretical text and an ability to push analysis beyond what's explicitly on the page. **(20 Percent)**

4. Final Paper: Students, in consultation with the professor, will develop a distinctive project which emerges from the intersection between their research interests and the course content. The result can either be a creative project or a paper, though either should show the ability to construct an argument and mobilize evidence in support of their core claims and should show a grasp of the basic conceptual framework of the course. Students will be asked to give a short class presentation, sharing their project and its implications with their classmates, as part of the process of developing and refining their ideas. **(30 Percent)**

Academic Integrity Policy:

The Annenberg School for Communication is committed to upholding the University's Academic Integrity code as detailed in the SCampus Guide. It is the policy of the School of Communication to report all violations of the code. Any serious violation or pattern of violations of the Academic Integrity Code will result in the student's expulsion from the Communication degree program.

It is particularly important that you are aware of and avoid plagiarism, cheating on exams, fabricating data for a project, submitting a paper to more than one professor, or submitting a paper authored by anyone other than yourself. If you have doubts about any of these practices, confer with a faculty member.

Resources on academic dishonesty can be found on the Student Judicial Affairs Web site (<http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS>). "Guide to Avoiding Plagiarism" addresses issues of paraphrasing, quotations, and citation in written assignments, drawing heavily upon materials used in the university's writing program; "Understanding and Avoiding Academic Dishonesty" addresses more general issues of academic integrity, including guidelines for adhering to standards concerning examinations and unauthorized collaboration.

The "2005-2006 SCampus" (<http://www.usc.edu/scampus>) contains the university's student conduct code and other student-related policies.

Disabilities Policy:

Students requesting academic accommodations based on a disability are required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP when adequate documentation is filed. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is open Monday-Friday, 8:30-5:00. The office is in Student Union 301 and their phone number is (213) 740-0776.

Wednesday, August 24th**Week 1: Science Fiction as Design Fiction****Readings:**

- Brian David Johnson, "... " from *Science Fiction Prototyping: Designing the Future with Science Fiction* (Morgan and Claypool, 2011), pp. .
- Philip K. Dick, "The Minority Report," *Selected Stories of Philip K. Dick* (New York: Random House, 2002), pp. 227-264.

The students will watch *Minority Report* prior to the first class session.

Guest Speaker: John Underkoffler, technical advisor to *Minority Report*; Brian David Johnson, author of *Science Fiction Prototyping*

Rec. for Further Reading:

- Paul Dourish and Genevieve Bell, "'Resistance is Futile: Reading Science Fiction Alongside Ubiquitous Computing,'" forthcoming. www.dourish.com/publications/2009/scifi-puc-

draft.pdf

- Bruce Sterling, "Design Fiction," *Interactions*, May-June 2009, <http://interactions.acm.org/content/?p=1244>.
- Mark Pesce, "Magic Mirror: Science Fiction as a Software Development Platform," Media in Transition conference, 1999, <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers/pesce.html>.
- David Stork, "The Best-Informed Dream: HAL and the Vision of 2001," *Hal's Legacy: 2001's Computer as Dream and Reality*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) <http://mitpress.mit.edu/e-books/hal/contents.html>.

Wednesday, August 31st

Week Two: Technological Utopianism

- Howard P. Segal, "The Vocabulary of Technological Utopianism" and "American Visions of Technological Utopia," *Technological Utopianism in American Culture* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005), pp. 10-44.
- Sina Nafai, "Underworld: An Interview with Rosalind Williams," *Cabinet*, Summer 2008, <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/30/najafi.php>.
- Edward Bellamy, Excerpt from *Looking Backward*, Chapter 1-12, pp. 3-72.

Wednesday, September 7th

Week Three The Origins of Science Fiction

- Andrew Ross, "Getting Out of the Gernsbeck Continuum," *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 100-135
- John W. Campbell, "Twilight;" (40-63) Lester del Rey, "Helen O'Loy;" (62-73) and Theodore Sturgeon, "Microscopic God," (115-142) in Robert Silverberg (ed.), *Science Fiction Hall of Fame*, Vol. 1, (New York, NY: Orb Books, 2005).
- Vannevar Bush, "As We May Think" (pp. 35-48); Alan Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" (pp. 49-64); Norbert Wiener, "Men, Machines, and the World About" (pp. 65-72), in Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (ed.), *The New Media Reader* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
- Richard Bleiler, "Hugo Gernsback and His Writers," (pp.65-67) and Katherine Pandora, "Science Fiction and the Hidden History of Science," (pp. 86-88) in Leigh Ronald Grossman (ed.), *Sense of Wonder: A Century of Science Fiction* (Rockville, MD: Wildside Press, forthcoming).

Recommended for Further Reading:

John Huntington, "The Myth of Genius: The Fantasy of Apolitical Power" (pp. 44-59) and "An Economy of Reason: The Motives of the Technocratic Hero" (pp. 69-79) in *Rationalizing Genius: Ideological Strategies in the Classic American Science Fiction Short Story* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

Wednesday, September 14th

Week Four: Postwar Dystopias

- Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, "Mass Communications, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action," (pp. 18-30) and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry Reconsidered" (pp.31-37) in Paul Marris and Sue Thornham (ed.), *Media Studies: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

- George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language." <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/orwell46.htm>
- George Orwell, *1984*, Chapter One. <http://www.george-orwell.org/1984/0.html>
- Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, pp. 1-44, 117-131
- Katharine Burdekin, excerpt from *Proud Man*.
- Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*.

Wednesday, September 21st

Week Five The Space Merchants and American Advertising

- Vance Packard, excerpt from *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: Ig, 2007), pp. 31-64.
- Jules Henry, "Advertising as a Philosophical System," *Culture Against Man* (New York: Vintage, 1965), pp. 45-99.
- Frederik Pohl and Cyril M. Kornbluth, *The Space Merchants* (New York: St. Martins, 1958)
- Frederik Pohl, "Tunnel Under the World" (pp.1-34) and "Happy Birthday, Baby Jesus" (pp.62-85), *The Best of Frederik Pohl* (New York: Sidgewick and Johnson, 1977)
- Henry Kuttner, "The Twonky," *The Best of Henry Kuttner* (New York: Ballantine, 1975), pp.167-189.

Wednesday, September 28th (Henry out of town)

Week Six Cordwainer Smith and Psychological Warfare

- Paul M.A. Linebarger, excerpt from *Psychological Warfare* (xxx), pp. 43-92.
- Cordwainer Smith, "Scanners Live in Vain" (pp.65-95); "The Dead Lady of Clown Town" (pp. 223-286); "The Ballad of Lost C'Mell" (pp.401-417) "A Planet Named Shayol," (pp. 419-448); "Alpha Ralpa Boulevard," (pp.xx) *The Rediscovery of Man: The Complete Short Science Fiction of Cordwainer Smith* (Boston: Boston Science Fiction Association, 1993)

(Guest via Skype: Karen Heleckson)

Wednesday, October 5th

Week Seven Altered States

- Alvin Toffler, "Diversity" from *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam, 1984), pp. 283-322.
- Betty Friedan, "The Problem That Has No Name" (pp.57-78) and "The Crisis in Women's Identity" (pp.123-136) *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001).
- James Tiptree Jr., "The Women Men Don't See," (pp.255-279) and John Varley, "Lollipop and Tar Baby," (pp. 357-374) in Brian Atteby and Ursula K. Le Guin (eds.) *The Norton Book of Science Fiction* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 255-279.
- Octavia Butler, "Blood Child," *Blood Child and Other Stories* (Seven Stories Press, 2005), pp.3-30.
- Pamela Zoline, "Heat Death of the Universe" in Pamela Sargent (ed.) *The New Women of Wonder* (New York: Vintage, 1978), pp. 100-119.
- Kate Wilhelm, "Baby, You Were Great," in Pamela Sargent (ed.) *Women of Wonder* (New York: Vintage, 1974), pp. 139-158.

- Darren Harris-Faire, "The New Wave," in Leigh Ronald Grossman (ed.), *Sense of Wonder: A Century of Science Fiction* (Rockville, MD: Wildside Press, forthcoming), pp. 519-520.

Wednesday, October 12th

Week Eight Cyberpunk and Beyond

- Bruce Sterling, "Preface;" James Patrick Kelly, "Solstice;" (pp. 66-104) Bruce Sterling and Lewis Shiner, "Mozart in Mirrorshades;" (pp. 223-239) and John Shirley, "Freezone;" (pp. 139- 177) in Bruce Sterling (ed.), *Mirrorshades: A Cyberpunk Anthology* (Berkeley, CA: Ace Books, 1988).
- William Gibson, "Johnny Mnemonic," *Burning Chrome* (New York: Ace, 1986), pp.1-22.
- Samuel R. Delaney, "Some Real Mothers: An Interview with Samuel R. Delaney," in *Silent Interviews* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), pp. 164-185.
- Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., "Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism," in Larry McCaffrey (ed.) *Storming the Reality Studio: A Case Book of Cyberpunk and Post-Modern Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 182-193.
- Don Riggs, "Cyberpunk," in Leigh Ronald Grossman (ed.), *Sense of Wonder: A Century of Science Fiction*, (Rockville, MD: Wildside Press, forthcoming), pp. 744-745.

Wednesday, October 19th

Week Nine Cyborg Feminism

- Anne Balsamo, "Signal to Noise: On the Meaning of Cyberpunk Subculture," in Frank Biocca and Mark R. Levy (eds.), *Communication in the Age of Virtual Reality* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995), pp. 347-368.
*All of Balsamo's online articles can be found here: http://www.designingculture.net/blog/?page_id=73
- Anne Balsamo, "Feminism for the Incurably Informed," *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 133-156.
- Veronica Hollinger, "Something Like a Fiction: Speculative Intersections of Sexuality and Technology" in Wendy Gay Pearson, Veronica Hollinger, and Joan Gordon (eds.), *Queer Universes: Sexualities and Science Fiction*, (Liverpool, U.K.: Liverpool University Press, 2008), pp. 140-160.
- C.L. Moore, "No Woman Born," Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth (eds.), *Reload: Rethinking Women and Cyberculture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 261-300.
- Pat Cadigan, *Mindplayers* (Orion, 2000).

Recommended Reading:

Donna Harroway, "Cyborgs at Large," in Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (eds.) *Technoculture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 1-20.

Guest Speaker: Anne Balsamo, USC

Wednesday, October 26th

Week Ten The Space Merchants Revisited

- Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang, "The Consumer as Explorer" (pp. 68-80) and "The Consumer as Rebel" (pp. 137-151), in *The Unmanageable Consumer: Contemporary Consumption and Its Fragmentation* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996).
- Cory Doctorow, *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* (New York: Tor, 2003).
- George Saunders, "Civil War Land In Bad Decline," *Civil War Land In Bad Decline* (Riverhead, 1997), pp. 3-24.
- Samuel R. Delany, "Aye, And Gomorrah," *Aye, and Gomorrah: Stories*, pp.91-101.

Wednesday, November 2nd

Week Eleven Posthumanism and Transhumanism

- Jussi Parikka, "Insects in the Age of Technology," in Jussi Parikka (ed.), *Insect Media: An Archeology of Animals and Technology* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), pp. ix-xxxv.
- N. Katherine Hayles, "Towards Embodied Virtuality," in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 1-24.
- Ray Kurzweil, "The Six Epochs," (pp.7-34) and "Eich bin ein Singularitarian," (pp. 369-390) *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, (London, England: Penguin, 2006), pp. 7-34.
- Vernor Vinge, *Rainbow's End* (New York: Tor, 2007)

Wednesday, November 9th (Henry traveling to Chicago)

Week Twelve Afrofuturism and the Global Imagination

- "What is Afro-Futurism?: An Interview with artist/educator D. Denenge Akpem," *Post-Black*, March 2010, <http://postblackthebook.blogspot.com/2010/03/afro-futurism-interview-with.html>.
- Catherine Rameriz, "Afrofuturism/Chicanafuturism: Fictive Kin," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 33(1), Spring 2008, pp. 185-194. <http://americanstudies.ucsc.edu/csramirez/Afrofuturism.pdf>

Andrea Hairston, "Girots of the Galaxy;" Larissa Lai, "Rachel;" Vandana Singh, "Delhi;" Tamai Kobayashi, "Panopte's Eye;" Karin Lowachee, "The Forgotten Ones;" Greg Van Eekhout, "Native Aliens;" Celu Amberstone, "Refugees;" devorah major, "Trade Winds;" and Carole McDonnel, "Lingua Franca," from Nalo Hopkinson and Upphinder Mehan (eds.), *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*, (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004).

- Erika Hoagland, "Postcolonial Science Fiction," in Leigh Ronald Grossman (ed.), *Sense of Wonder: A Century of Science Fiction* (Rockville, MD: Wildside Press, forthcoming), pp. 951-953.

Wednesday, November 16th

Week Thirteen Steampunk and Retrofuturism

- Dexter Palmer, *The Dream of Perpetual Motion* (New York: St. Martin's, 2010)

- Rebecca Onion, “Reclaiming the Machine: An Introductory Look at Steampunk in Everyday Practice,” *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1(1), Autumn, 2008, pp. 138-163.
- Henry Jenkins, “‘The Tomorrow That Never Was’: Retrofuturism in the Comics of Dean Motter,” in Jorn Ahrens and Arno Meteling (eds.), *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence*, New York, NY: Continuum, 2010, pp. 63-83.
- Burgesbee L. Hobbs, “Steampunk,” in Leigh Ronald Grossman (ed.), *Sense of Wonder: A Century of Science Fiction*, Rockville, MD: Wildside Press, forthcoming, pp. 909-911.

Wednesday, November 30th

Week Fourteen Student Presentations