

Visions and Universes 2015: Science Fiction at Macaulay Honors College

Welcome to Visions and Universes!

For most people today, Science Fiction is a term which usually applies to the movies. But we're going to be considering Science Fiction as a **literary** genre (although we will be seeing a few films). We're going to be looking at the place of Science Fiction in literature, and the literature in Science Fiction...but we'll also be talking and thinking about Science Fiction's place and role in popular culture. We'll also look at connections between science and science fiction, and how the two feed on (and challenge and distress) each other. We'll want to see how and why science fiction has become, in the words of author Thomas Disch, "the dreams our stuff is made of."

If the visions of science fiction are visions of our universe, we'll want to see what shapes and informs those visions, and how the different universes science fiction explores fit into (or become) our own universe.

(You can also read the "official" [course description and learning objectives](#))

Instructor/ITF Contact

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But you need more than just how to reach us! Who are we and why should we be reached? What can we do for you? You'll think about that more yourself, and decide for yourself.

For just a bit more information, have a look at Professor Ugoretz' "[Expo](http://mountebank.org/expo)" Pages (<http://mountebank.org/expo>) or ITF Jenny Kijowski's [eportfolio](http://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/jkijowski/) (<http://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/jkijowski/>).

Course Description and Learning Objectives

This course examines the literary and cultural genre of science fiction. Science fiction's role as a cultural and counter-cultural force, the impact of fandom and fans, as well as its history and reception will be seen through the lens of standard science fiction tropes and themes including:

- Time Travel
- Alien Invasion/Contact
- Biological/Genetic Manipulation
- Cyberpunk
- Alternative History
- Space Opera/Future War
- Post-Apocalypse
- Utopia/Dystopia

The course will also use science fiction as an example and testing ground for exploring separations between "literary" and "popular" (or "high" and "low") culture.

Learning objectives:

- To make students aware of the history and diversity of science fiction
- To examine the ways in which science fiction uniquely deals with vital literary and cultural themes.
- To examine the reasons for and nature of the separation between "literary" and "popular" fiction.
- To improve students' skills in literary and cultural analysis.

Course Information

One quick note. In this course, we use the abbreviation "SF," and **never** use the term "Sci-Fi." I'll explain that more clearly in class, but for now, don't use that term, unless you want to see your professor's angry face! 🤡

Course Materials

For each Module, you'll need to read three short stories (or two or four). The short stories will be linked on the [reading assignments](#) page (which is password protected. I'll give you the password in class). You'll also need to read , you'll need to buy. They're all widely available in a number of formats and from a number of vendors. It doesn't matter which edition you use, so feel free to buy an older copy or a used copy. We definitely want you to own these books (and some of them you might own already!)

(Buy these!)

1. *The Martian* by Andy Weir
2. *Hominids* by Robert J. Sawyer
3. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Phillip K. Dick
4. *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card
5. *Kindred* by Octavia Butler
6. *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ

We'll also be seeing at least two (maybe three or four) films. Those will be shown during class time in the screening room here at Macaulay, but you can feel free to also buy or rent them yourself to review them on your time.

1. *Terminator 2*
2. *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*
3. *Blade Runner* (maybe)
4. *Contact* (maybe)

Assignments

For each reading, you will need to post a brief response here on the site. These can be informal and personal, but will work as a way to get us started in discussion, so they should be posted before class time.

For each Module (except the first and last), you'll need to write a paper (see the [Writing Assignments page](#)). All papers must be submitted on time. **NO late papers!**

You'll also have a final project which will be more creative/exploratory/innovative. We'll talk much more about that later on.

You'll also need to attend every class and to participate (actively, productively, consistently) in all class discussions. Every time!

Grading Policies

Your grade will be based on three criteria, equally weighted (33.33333% for each criterion)

1. Your grades on your papers (and the final project) will be averaged together (weighted to reward improvement) for one grade. (33.33333%)
2. Your reading responses will count for one grade (33.33333%).
3. You will receive a grade for your participation in class discussions (**quality and quantity**). This will be the third grade (33.33333%).

Your final grade in the course will be the average of these three grades.

The alert student will have noticed the extra .00001%...that's the bonus point for good behavior (maintaining the integrity of the time-stream, upholding the prime directive, respecting the laws of physics, and so on.)

Plagiarism Statement

Do not plagiarize. EVER.

Disability/Accessibility

If you have any special needs or requirements to help you succeed in the course, please let me know (privately, if you prefer). I will do whatever is needed to make sure that all students have equal access and opportunity in this course.

Schedule/Topics/Reading Assignments

March 4: start module 3, module 2 papers due

March 18: start module 4, module 3 papers due




April 1: start module 5, module 4 papers due

April 15: start module 6, module 5 papers due

April 29: start module 7, module 6 papers due

May 13: start module 8, module 7 papers due

May 20: final projects due

	<p>Module Two</p> <p>"To Boldly Go"</p> <p>Space Exploration and Space Colonies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>"The Cold Equations," Tom Godwin</u> • <u>"It's Great to be Back" Robert Heinlein</u> • <u>"Down and Out On Ellfive Prime" Dean Ing</u> • <i>The Martian</i> Andy Weir (buy it!) 	<p>Weeks</p> <p>3-4</p>
	<p>Module Three</p> <p>"The Star Beast"</p> <p>Animals and Aliens...What is Human?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>"Send Me a Kiss by Wire" Hilbert Schenk</u> • <u>"Dolphin's Way" Gordon Dickson</u> • <u>"Davey Jones' Ambassador" Raymond Gallun</u> • <i>Hominids</i> Robert J. Sawyer (buy it!) 	<p>Weeks</p> <p>5-6</p>
	<p>Module Four</p> <p>"I, Robot"</p> <p>Artificial Intelligence, Artificial Life</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>"The Last Question" Isaac Asimov</u> • <u>"The Life and Times of Multivac" Isaac Asimov</u> • <i>"Mary Shelley's Frankenstein"</i> (film) (in class!) • <i>Do Androids Dream of Electric</i> 	<p>Weeks</p> <p>7-8</p>

		<i>Sheep</i> Phillip K. Dick (buy it!)	
	Module Five "Childhood's End" Coming to Faith and Coming of Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>"I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream"</u> Harlan Ellison • <u>"The Star"</u> Arthur C. Clarke • <u>"Weyr Search"</u> Anne McCaffrey • <i>Ender's Game</i> Orson Scott Card (buy it!) 	Weeks 9-10
	Module Six "The Past Through Tomorrow" Time Travel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>"Light of Other Days"</u> Bob Shaw • <u>"The Very Slow Time Machine"</u> Ian Watson • <i>Terminator 2</i> (film) (in class!) • <i>Kindred</i> Octavia Butler (buy it!) 	Weeks 11-12
	Module Seven "The New Romancers" The New Wave, Cyberpunk, Gender and Race	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>"Johnny Mnemonic"</u> William Gibson • <u>"Nine Lives"</u> Ursula LeGuin • <i>The Female Man</i> Joanna Russ (buy it!) 	Weeks 13-14

Writing Assignments

General Tips

- Papers will **not** be accepted after the deadline.
- The papers should be approximately three typed pages in length. By that I mean three double-spaced, normal margin, normal font size, pages. It's OK if they're longer. It's OK if they're a little shorter. They should be long enough for you to say what you need to say. I'm much more interested in quality than quantity.
- I'm interested in your ideas, your responses to the material and ideas in the course. It's fine to be original, and it's fine to have opinions. Just be sure to refer

to what you've read. Show me that you've **thought** about what your classmates have said in class (and what **you** have said), **and** the readings.

- *You may choose one of the questions I ask, or you may combine several, or you may use only part of one, or you may modify one. These are papers, not quizzes, so the emphasis is on thinking and writing, not just "answering the question."*

<div> <h2>Module Two</h2> </div> <div> <h3>"To Boldly Go"</h3> </div> <div> <h4>Space Exploration and Space Colonies</h4> </div> <div> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do the readings in this module connect to your ideas of what an explorer is, or should be? • What do these readings say about the kind of person who will succeed in the future? • What is there about the way life is led on Earth right now that will need to change for us to survive in the future? • How can science and a knowledge of science be a tool for survival, or a tool for destruction? • Do you see yourself as a Loonie or a Groundhog? What is it about Earth that's better in the Moon? Where would you rather live, and where would you say "It's Great to be Back"? • In "Down and Out on Ellfive Prime," who's the outlaw? What's the purpose of an outlaw in a space colony? What's the purpose of an outlaw on Earth? • Is space exploration romantic? What about exploring the depths of the sea? or the South Pole or the Amazon Rainforest? What does it mean to "Sail Beyond the Sunset?" • Read "<u>Ulysses</u>" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Connect that poem to any of the readings. In the poem, Ulysses is retired from adventuring. His exploring days are over. Are yours? Are all of ours? • Is survival of the fittest a fair rule? What about when people make mistakes? • What did you learn from any of these readings? About life? About people? About science? About SF? 	<div> <p>Weeks 3-4</p> </div>
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Module Three

"The Star Beast"


Animals and
Aliens...What is
Human?



- What is your definition of human? Does it include conscience? morality? soul? language? logic? Define your terms.
- Analyze one or more of the stories you read, and connect your analysis to some of our class discussion and some current events or issues, in terms of some criticism of how humans treat animals
- You are arguing in front of the Alien Judge. It is about to decide whether humans are ready to join the Galactic Civilization, whether we need another few billion years to grow up, or whether the planet should just be fumigated and allowed to start from scratch. State your case. Begin, "May it please the court, Your Alien Honor..."
- What are the similarities between the ways non-human aliens are regarded in stories, movies and tv (yes, you can include Mork, or even Alf) and the ways human strangers are regarded in our society today?
- When scientists try to understand nature, are they acting for their own benefit, or nature's? Connect your answer to the readings and discussions.
- What is it about dolphins, anyway? Why do people get so goopy about them? Try to figure out why we love some animals (puppies, panthers) and hate others (squid, pigeons, that buzzing fly trying to eat your potato salad).
- What are the consequences of defining some **people** as not really human? The events of the latest news reports may be relevant to this question.
- One way to define a concept is to define its opposite. What would be a living thing that is definitely non-human? An alien we could never see as being like us?
- What did you learn from any of these stories? About life? About people? About science? About SF?
- Look at some ideas of aliens from some definite historical periods (the 50's, the 70's, the 90's) and try to analyze what

Weeks

5-6

	those ideas show about the periods themselves.	
Module Four	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the issues involved in creating life? When we make an artificial human? Look up Asimov's "Three Laws of Robotics." Are these valuable laws for robots? For Humans? Are they sufficient? What would be your choice of laws? What's wrong with hubris? Compare the stories and the film to what you think or have experienced in parent/child relationships. What does SF tell us about people's feelings about this kind of relationship? Find some information, and explain, the Turing Test for Artificial Intelligence. Is this a sufficient test? Could you design a better one? What would it be like? What if the machines stop cooperating? or stop working? or decide they'd rather do without us? Is your body enhanced by technology in any way? Would you like it to be? When does a human become a cyborg, become a robot? You are now a robot. Write a letter to your creator. How would you feel if each country had its own Multivac as their political leader, and we all just trusted its divine wisdom to make decisions to run the world. Multivac seems to be incredibly logical, and rational and cannot be influenced by anger, sentimentality or any other emotion that can make us biased in making decisions. Do you think the world would be better off having Multivac leaders to make political decisions because humans do not seem to be able to agree what is right or wrong? 	Weeks 7-8
"I, Robot"		
Artificial Intelligence, Artificial Life		
		
Module Five	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyze Anne McCaffrey's "Weyr Search." What's the meaning of this story? It's science fiction, but it reads a lot like fantasy, but what's the point? Why did she write this story, and why try to make these points in this way How do the stories in this module portray children? Do 	Weeks 9-10
"Childhood's End"		
Coming to Faith		

and Coming of Age



these portrayals fit with your opinions and experiences of children? (From knowing them or being them).

- Is there a conflict between science and faith? Is it possible to be rational and religious at the same time?
- Did you ever learn anything that made you question all that you thought you had known? How did you react? How should people react to this kind of learning? Is it ever possible to keep an open mind?
- Do you see the world differently now than you did five years ago? ten years? twenty? What changed? What will change in your world view in the next five, or ten or twenty years?
- You are now yourself, but you are ten years old (or five or fifteen, you choose). Write a letter to your parents. What do you know that they should know, but don't?
- Why is science fiction worth reading? Why is it especially worth reading for children or young people? What is the "golden age" of science fiction?
- You are an alien anthropologist. You are studying these strange Earthlings, but your race has no childhood...you just hatch from an egg as an adult. Write a report to your supervisory Throognet, explaining human childhood, especially child/adult relations.
- When there is a conflict between science and faith, SF generally says that science should win. But...do you have "faith" in science itself? Are there questions that science can not, and should not, answer?

Module Six

"The Past Through
Tomorrow"

Time Travel

- Analyze *Terminator 2*, in terms of the Grandfather Paradox and time travel, or the issues we looked at earlier in the course dealing with creators and creations.
- Why are stories of time travel so appealing? What is that intrigues you (and so many others) about traveling to another time.
- Compare stories of time travel to the future and time travel

Weeks
11-12



to the past. What makes these stories different from each other? What elements do they have in common?

- I have a time machine. It can not send people back or forward in time, but it can send written messages. I will give you one free sample, for a limited time only. You can send a your written message to whenever you like. Write a letter to people in the past, or the future. What would you like to know? What would you like them to know about our time?
- Think of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* or the more recent (and terrible) film *Black Knight*, or some other examples from film or literature. Why are some historical periods so very attractive to contemporary audiences? Name some of these periods, and discuss their attraction.
- What remains the same throughout history? You may have heard the French phrase, "*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*," (the more things change, the more they remain the same). How true is this? Why?
- Think of historical characters or events that you've learned about. Try to pick some that are somehow important to you. Then do some web research. Find a link to some information about your chosen character or event. Imagine travelling to see that time or person. What does your imagination reveal about you?

Module Seven

"The New Romancers"

The New Wave, Cyberpunk, Gender and Race

- Analyze one of the stories you read for this Module. Compare it to some of the themes we've discussed before...or some of the earlier stories. How is the story from this Module different in style or theme or mood? What might be the reasons behind that difference?
- Who gets left out of Science Fiction? What would need to change to attract more women and people of color to SF? or to Science?.
- If you envision the future as dark and unpleasant, what

Weeks
13-14



does that say about the present?

- How have the social and technological changes in your own lifetime affected you? How could things change for the better?
- As we interface more smoothly with computers, do we lose any of our humanity? When do we cross the line?
- If you could choose to create your own offspring, designing the child in whatever way you wish, what choices would you make? What would you select? Or is it even a kind of choice you really want to have?
- Some people say that because the world has changed, stories need to change, too. They say we can't tell stories in the old way (beginning, middle, end). TV, the internet, and the fast-paced modern life have fractured our consciousness. What do you think?

Final Project

For the final project I would like you to design and create a multimedia representation of some of the themes (or one of the themes) we have been discussing.

We will talk more about this as the semester goes on, and give you plenty of time to plan and carry out the project. Stay tuned!