STS 2163 [2180]: Science Fiction
11 am to 12:20 pm, Tuesdays and Thursdays, Rogers Hall 503
Polytechnic Institute of New York University
Fall 2011

Instructor
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Office hours: Monday and Wednesday 2:00–2:50, Thursday 12:30–1:30 pm, or by appointment

Prerequisite
Students must have completed HuSS 1023W (or the equivalent) before taking this course.

Course Description
This semester, we shall consider the genre of science fiction as evidence of changes in technological and scientific culture in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Thus, we shall read representative fiction from the second industrial revolution, the age of big science, the Cold War, the age of venture capital, and the advent of new media, considering how well authors are able to establish an alternative public sphere to debate the issues facing a technological society.

Objectives
This semester you will learn to:
• Understand the transformations of scientific and technical culture (and media) in the 20th century
• Analyze the fundamental techniques of science fiction and recognize authors of the genre
• Critique the genre’s presentation of the interaction among science, technology, and society
• Consider important issues in Science and Technology Studies, such as social constructivism

Structure
Class time is devoted to lectures about the history of science and technology and discussion of the reading material in this context. We shall practice the kind of analysis you will do on the exams.

Readings
The required texts for the course are:
• Vonda McIntyre, Superluminal (any edition)
MacIntyre is available used; the rest are at the NYU bookstore. There are additional PDFs on Blackboard. Please let me know in advance of class if you have any trouble locating a required reading assignment.

Grading
I shall calculate your semester grade on a percentage basis as follows:
• Presentation 10%
• Papers 20% (10% each)
• Quizzes 20%
• Exams 50% (20% midterm, 30% final)
Individual assignments are graded on a typical A to F scale. Grades in the “D” range (60%–69%) indicate an honest attempt to complete an assignment, even though the result is deficient in some way; the “C” range indicates an average fulfillment of the basic assignment. Grades in the “B” range are done thoroughly and reflect the kind of work we do together in class, and grades in the “A” range represent deep thinking from a student who is taking independent responsibility for his or her own learning.

Requirements

Attendance: On-time attendance for the entire class period is mandatory. Students who miss four or more classes automatically fail the course. For the purposes of attendance, missing fewer than twenty minutes (arriving late, departing early, leaving the room) counts as one-third of an absence. Missing more than twenty minutes counts as an absence. If you must miss a class meeting, doctor’s notes are not necessary, but you should contact a reliable classmate to get notes and an overview of the class.

Decorum: Please pay attention during class and avoid behaviors that distract others. Do not eat or sleep during class. You should not use electronic devices, such as cell phones or laptops, at all. Do not hold side conversations; if someone tries to talk to you during class, tell him or her to speak to you after class. Do not bring visitors without advance permission. Do everything you can do to get the most out of class, and make sure others in the class can do so as well.

Examinations: There are two examinations in this class, one midterm during our regular class period and one final exam during the exam period at a date and time the Registrar sets. The exams are cumulative and closed-book. They consist of short answer and essay questions. Missing an exam results in a zero.

Honesty: Be advised that I take the University policy about academic dishonesty seriously and punish cheating or plagiarism by awarding a grade of “F” for the course and referring cases for further action.

Papers: You will write two papers (1,000 words, or about three pages each) for this class; both must be uploaded to Blackboard and scanned by SafeAssign before the deadline. The first paper is a short story like what we are reading in class. The second is a critique of the genre of science fiction. Late papers receive a grade of zero. I shall provide more details about these as the deadline approaches.

Preparation: According to New York State guidelines, a student should spend at least two hours to prepare for each hour in class. Thus, you can expect to spend about six hours per week getting ready for class. Plan accordingly so that you can read thoroughly, write carefully, and comment thoughtfully. It is not possible to let this class “happen” without your active involvement. Bring the class materials we are discussing with you and be ready to make observations on the course themes every time.

Presentation: Each student signs up for a “mini declamation” on one author, proposing in 3–5 minutes how that author would define science fiction based on the story we are reading. The key to a declamation is that it is a first-person presentation from the subject’s perspective. It is not necessary to use outside research for this presentation, but if you do, make sure you indicate which ideas are not your own. The best presentations will use examples from the course in addition to the author.

Quizzes: There will be unannounced quizzes on the reading assignments and course lessons. You may consult your own handwritten notes, but not books or printouts, for these quizzes. If you miss a quiz due to lateness or absence, you shall receive a zero.

How to Do Well

1. Be on time. At the start of class, you will notice that I provide a preview of what is coming up and also answer questions. If you regularly miss these first minutes, you will start to feel the
uncomfortable sensation that you do not know what is going on. Keep in mind that trains, subways and busses usually take much longer than they “should,” so plan accordingly. Being late or taking a bathroom break occasionally is okay; it happens to everyone. If you are always late or leaving the room, then you are doing something wrong.

2. **Ask questions.** Please raise your hand at the beginning of class or during a presentation. It does little good to whisper to the person next to you; instead, feel free to ask me for clarification. Also, use office hours or write an e-mail message for additional information.

3. **Take notes,** even if I am not writing on the board. Taking notes helps you stay focused on the material we are studying. Note taking also serves another purpose: it helps you get used to writing about the course materials in your own words. Since the evaluation in this course is written, taking notes is valuable practice (and good exercise for your writing muscles!). There is no need to write down everything I say, but make sure you take down interesting ideas and connections to the course themes. Go over your notes after class to fill in the gaps.

4. **Read actively.** Prepare by reading the assignment for the day carefully before class. Mark key phrases and passages that have to do with the ideas in the course. Take notes like you are preparing a laboratory notebook— write down what you think is important, with examples, and prepare questions you want to ask.

5. **Avoid grade jockeying.** Some students sometimes use the grade weights in this syllabus to plan toward which 80% of the course they will make an effort. The theory seems to be that even by neglecting 20% of the assignments, one can still get a B in the course. This is a flawed strategy. Instead, you should aim for a slightly higher grade on each assignment than you would like for the class. If you want a B, make sure you do B+ or A- work on all assignments. In the end, factoring in for misunderstandings and emergencies, you will probably get that B.

6. **Work proactively.** Start an assignment when it is assigned, not when the deadline is looming. It sometimes takes a little bit of time wondering about an assignment before you make progress, and there are often times that you need guidance. If you wait until the last moment to get started, you cannot negotiate these hurdles adequately.

**Bibliography**

You may find these books interesting sources for further information; I shall refer to some in class.


Tentative Assignment Schedule

Tuesday, September 6  
**Prelude**
H. G. Wells, “The Time Machine” (1895) – HoF

Thursday, September 8  
Augusto Bissiri, “The Lord of the Winds” (1926)

Tuesday, September 13  
Leslie F. Stone, “Men with Wings” (1929)

*Note: Tuesday, September 13, is the last day for program adjustments. If you drop before this deadline, no notation will appear on your transcript. No one may add the course after this date.*

Thursday, September 15  
Clare Winger Harris, “The Ape Cycle” (1930); David H. Keller, “Unto Us a Child is Born” (1933)

Tuesday, September 20  

*Group 1 presentations*

Thursday, September 22  
**The Golden Age**
John W. Campbell, “Who Goes There?” (1938); Robert A. Heinlein, “Universe” (1941) – HoF

Tuesday, September 27  
Lester del Rey, “Nerves” (1942) – HoF

*Paper 1 due*

Thursday, September 29  
Murray Leinster, “First Contact” (1945) – pdf; Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore, “Vintage Season” (1946) – HoF

Tuesday, October 4  
Theodore Sturgeon, “Baby Is Three” (1952); C. M. Kornbluth, “The Marching Morons” (1951) – HoF

*Group 2 presentations*

Thursday, October 6  
**Midterm Exam**

Thursday, October 13  
Isaac Asimov, “Sucker Bait” (1954)

Tuesday, October 18  

Thursday, October 20  
Eric Frank Russell, “… And Then There Were None” (1951) – HoF

*Group 3 presentations*
Tuesday, October 25  The New Wave

Thursday, October 27 Philip K. Dick, Ubik (1969), ch. 1–5

Tuesday, November 1 Ubik, ch. 6–11

Thursday, November 3 Ubik, ch. 12–17


Thursday, November 10 Vonda McIntyre, Superluminal (1984), ch. 1–3
Group 4 presentations

Tuesday, November 15 Superluminal, ch. 4–7

Note: Wednesday, November 16, is the withdrawal deadline. If you withdraw before this date, you will see a “W” on your transcript. Otherwise, you will see a grade A to F at the end of the course.

Thursday, November 17 Superluminal, ch. 8–10

Tuesday, November 22 Paul Di Filippo, “Phylogenesis” (1989) and “Mud Puppy Goes Uptown” (1994)

Paper 2 due

Thursday, November 24 No class – Thanksgiving


Tuesday, December 6 Aimee Bender, “Dearth” (2005); Pam Noles, “Shame” (2006) – JT
Group 5 presentations

Group 6 presentations

Note: The Registrar’s Office will schedule our final exam sometime in December. Do not make travel plans during this period until the exact date and time have been announced.