

# CMLIT 122: Global Science Fiction

Spring 2018

Elec Eng West 201

Tue/Thu 12:05 - 1:20

Professor: Grant Wythoff

([gxw63@psu.edu](mailto:gxw63@psu.edu))

Office Hours by appointment

Course site:

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



*This syllabus is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).*

---

**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?

## 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 participation credit. Instead, you must be an active conversant, 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 the way we live with technology, with the changing environment, and with one another today. 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

Weekly attendance in class is expected. If you must be absent from a session for a serious reason, then you should contact me before the missed class and explain why you will not be in attendance. Cases of continuous, unexplained absence will result in a penalty to your grade or your ineligibility to complete the course. Attendance and active participation in discussions are part of fulfilling the course requirements. I will notify an advising dean if you have **three or more** unwarranted absences. No extensions will be given 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.

## 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.

## 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

#### Part I: 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, “[Shamblau](#)” (1933)
  - also page through the [November 1933 issue of \*Weird Tales\*](#) [Tales\\*](http://www.luminist.org/archives/SF/WT.htm)](<http://www.luminist.org/archives/SF/WT.htm>)

**Part II: The Golden Age****Tue Jan 30**

- stories TBD

**Thu Feb 1**

- stories TBD

**Part III: 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**

Thanks to Lisa Yaszek, Nicholas Knouf, Eric Hayot and Matt Tierney, whose syllabi and pedagogy influenced the design and content of this course.