

LIT 145S.01 (Summer 2011)
 MTuTh 3:30-5:35 PM
 Location: Perkins LINK 2-079 seminar 3

Instructor: Gerry Canavan
 Email: gc24@duke.edu
 Office Hours: by appointment

21ST CENTURY SCIENCE FICTION

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND TRAJECTORY

This course will consider science fiction film, television, prose, and graphic narrative of the last decade. How have the creators of various science fictions commented on such contemporary crises as climate change, the financial collapse, undocumented immigration, 9/11, and the Iraq War? What is the role of science fiction in articulating these debates? What is the relationship between science fiction, politics, and culture? William Gibson has noted that "the sort of thing we used to think in science fiction has colonized the rest of our reality"; what then is the place for science fiction when, in the words of Kim Stanley Robinson, "the world has become a science fiction novel"?

We will begin by exploring academic definitions of science fiction with respect to several popular subgenres of science fiction (space empire, zombies, reproductive futurity, and superheroes), culminating in the first of three science fiction novels this term: China Miéville's *The City and the City* (2009). Following the midterm, we will focus more specifically on the contemporary imagination of the future with two recent novels, Margaret Atwood's eco-apocalyptic *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and Charles Stross's Singularitarian *Accelerando* (2005), alongside James Cameron's *Avatar* (2008) and Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse* (2009). We will conclude the course with a viewing and discussion of Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2009), taken alongside two similarly metafictional short stories from *The Apex Book of World SF*.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Identify and understand various formal characteristics of science fiction
- Apply techniques of critical analysis to science fiction literature, film, television, and comics
- Demonstrate understanding of the cultural, historical, and political contexts in which contemporary science fiction has been produced
- Use literary study to develop skills for careful reading and clear writing
- Read and discuss science fiction on the levels of both form and content

REQUIRED TEXTS (*available at the Regulator Bookshop on Ninth Street*)

- Robert Kirkman, *The Walking Dead, Vol. 1* (978-1582406190)
- Brian K. Vaughn, *Y: The Last Man, Vol. 1* (978-1563899805)
- China Miéville, *The City and the City* (978-0345497529)
- Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (978-0385721677)
- Charles Stross, *Accelerando* (978-0441014156)

Additional course materials are available online at blackboard.duke.edu.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- short daily responses (due by 1 PM on Monday, Tuesdays, and Thursdays)
- two longer responses on *Avatar* and *Inception* (recommended length: 2 pages)
- one take-home midterm
- one five-minute in-class presentation outlining the main claims of your final paper
- one 8-10 page final paper on a topic approved in advance
- class participation

GRADING

Grades will follow the following rubric:

* To earn a **C**, you must clearly restate the meaning or project of a text in your own terms. A C essay may volunteer an original argument, but will likely lack evidence or analysis of its sources. C essays are clearly written, though they might display some grammatical weakness.

* To earn a **B**, you must begin to raise important questions about the text under consideration and to use those questions to drive your own interpretive agenda. A B essay typically advances an original argument and provides solid analysis of the text(s) under consideration. B essays are clear, concise, and free of grammatical errors.

* To earn an **A**, you must construct an essay that does more than simply comment on the work of others; you must forward, counter, or transform what they have to say. An A essay advances an original argument that builds toward a climax and makes a persuasive case for its own significance. A essays are clearly written, and often eloquent.

* A **D** means that you have not written in clear prose or that you seem to have deeply misunderstood the text. An **F** means that you did not fully or seriously engage the assignment.

Your final grade in the course will be determined as follows:

- 25% Midterm
- 25% Final Paper
- 12.5% *Avatar* and *Inception* responses
- 12.5% Presentation of Research
- 25% Class Participation, Daily Blackboard Responses, and Attendance

Detailed descriptions of all assignments will be distributed in class in advance of the due date.

FORMAT OF WRITTEN WORK

Written work must be typed in twelve-point font, double-spaced with one-inch margins, saved in a format Microsoft Word can open. I expect you to *edit* and *proofread* all written work, even Blackboard posts. Drafts that contain excessive typos or grammar mistakes may be returned to the author for correction before I offer comments.

Please give each piece of writing an original title, and include your name, assignment, and due date in a header on the first page. Insert page numbers if your work spans more than one page.

All written work should be submitted via Blackboard's Digital Dropbox **by 3:30 PM the day it is due**. Late work will be penalized a half-grade if it is in by class time and a full grade thereafter. Except in very unusual circumstances, work will not be accepted by email.

ATTENDANCE

Class discussion is an essential component of this seminar. It is important that you come to class every day having read the required material and prepared to discuss it.

Attendance in this class is mandatory. You should plan on attending every class. **You are allowed two unexcused absences over the course of the summer semester. After that, your class participation will drop by a third for each additional unexcused absence.** Upon the fifth unexcused absence, you will receive a failing grade for the course.

Missing a scheduled conference with me will count as one absence. Excessive tardiness, or coming to class unprepared, will also count as absences.

Please talk to me (in advance if possible) if you ever find you will need to miss class.

BLACKBOARD

This course will make extensive use of the Blackboard site at <http://blackboard.duke.edu>. In addition to being a place where you can find electronic copies of the syllabus and other course handouts, Blackboard also features an online forum where we can continue our discussion after class is over.

The Blackboard discussion forums are an excellent place for people who may feel inhibited by regular class discussion to share their opinions with the class. I will be reading the discussion forum regularly and I recommend you do the same. **You should write a short post—a five-sentence paragraph is fine—about one of the current discussion topics in the appropriate forum by 1 PM before every class.** (Additional posts, and posts that respond to other students' arguments, will be looked upon favorably when I calculate your final grade.)

CONFERENCES

We will have an in-person conference mid-semester to discuss your plans for your final research paper. I am very happy to meet with you individually to discuss either graded work or work in progress at any other time. See or email me to set up an appointment.

EMAIL

Students in this class are required to check their Duke email account at least once a day, in case there are any last-minute announcements or disruptions.

LAPTOP POLICY

Because of the length and formal characteristics of some of the material we will discuss, in-class use of laptops will be allowed and encouraged when such works are under discussion. However, students *must* refrain from other computer uses, including email, instant messaging, Facebook, and so on. I reserve the right to ban individual laptops if this becomes a problem.

HONOR CODE

Students are expected to abide by the terms of the student code of academic conduct, available in your undergraduate bulletin or online at <http://www.integrity.duke.edu>. I urge you all to examine this material and consult me with any questions you may have about plagiarism or academic integrity *before* it becomes an issue.

Ignorance of what constitutes plagiarism is not an acceptable excuse for plagiarism. **Academic dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated and will result in a failing grade for the course.**

ACADEMIC ACCOMODATIONS

Students with learning or other disabilities who believe that they may need accommodations in this class should visit <http://www.aas.duke.edu/trinity/t-reqs/ld.html> to learn about Duke's policies concerning academic accommodations. If you anticipate a need for accommodations due to disability, please contact me as early in the semester as possible. All communication about disabilities will be kept confidential.

WRITING STUDIO

All students in this course are strongly encouraged to visit the Writing Studio, with locations at Perkins, Lilly, and the Art Building on East Campus, at any stage of the writing process. You may also make use of the Writing Studio's e-tutor program. Please visit the Writing Studio's website at <http://uwp.duke.edu/wstudio/> to find out how to schedule an appointment and to access the studio's online resources.

RESPECT

This classroom is a community. It is crucial that we treat each other with the appropriate level of courtesy and respect. No one should be made to feel unwelcome here.

Failure to treat other students with the respect they deserve will **severely** negatively impact your class participation grade.

PRELIMINARY SCHEDULE

Any changes to this schedule will be announced in class as they become necessary.

Texts marked “at home” should be read before class. Texts marked “in class” will be introduced or shown in class. Blackboard responses may respond to either type of text.

DATE	ASSIGNMENTS AND RESPONSES DUE BY 1 PM
T JULY 5	INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE Defining SF in class: <i>The Matrix, Star Trek</i>
R JULY 7	Space Empire at home: Wells Tower, “Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned” in class: <i>Battlestar Galactica, Firefly</i>
M JULY 11	Zombies at home: Kelly Link, “Some Zombie Contingency Plans”; Robert Kirkman, <i>The Walking Dead, Vol. 1</i> in class: <i>28 Days Later, Shaun of the Dead, Zombieland, etc.</i>
T JULY 12	Reproductive Futurity at home: Nisi Shawl, “Deep End”; Brian K. Vaughn, <i>Y: The Last Man</i> in class: <i>Children of Men</i>
R JULY 14	Superheroes at home: Ted Chiang, “Understand” in class: <i>X-Men, Iron Man, etc.</i>
M JULY 18	Cognitive Estrangement China Miéville, <i>The City and the City</i> (first section)
T JULY 19	Cognitive Estrangement continued China Miéville, <i>The City and the City</i> (second and third sections)
R JULY 21	CONFERENCES—NO CLASS
M JULY 25	MIDTERM DUE—NO CLASS
T JULY 26	in-class screening: <i>Avatar</i>
R JULY 28	Avatar and Others FIRST LONG RESPONSE DUE at home: Annalee Newitz, “When Will White People Stop Making Movies Like <i>Avatar</i> ?”; Slavoj Žižek, “Return of the Natives”; Octavia Butler, “Amnesty” in class: “Pumzi”, “Plastic Bag”
M AUGUST 1	Eco-Apocalypse at home: Margaret Atwood, <i>Oryx and Crake</i> (first half) in class: <i>Daybreakers, Moon</i>
T AUGUST 2	Eco-Apocalypse continued at home: Margaret Atwood, <i>Oryx and Crake</i> (second half) in class: <i>WALL-E</i>

R AUGUST 4	<p style="text-align: center;">The Singularity at home: Charles Stross, <i>Accelerando</i> (first half) RESEARCH PRESENTATIONS, DAY ONE</p>
M AUGUST 8	<p style="text-align: center;">The Singularity continued at home: Charles Stross, <i>Accelerando</i> (second half) RESEARCH PRESENTATIONS, DAY TWO</p>
T AUGUST 9	<p style="text-align: center;">Cyberpunk and Its Discontents at home: Nalo Hopkinson, “A Habit of Waste” in class: <i>Dollhouse</i></p>
W AUGUST 10	<p style="text-align: center;">make-up class: <i>Inception</i> screening (time and location TBA)</p>
R AUGUST 11	<p style="text-align: center;">Science Fiction as Philosophy at home: Guy Hasson, “The Levantine Experiments”; Han Song, “The Wheel of Samsara”; <i>Inception</i> Closing Thoughts SECOND LONG RESPONSE DUE LAST DAY OF CLASS</p>
S AUGUST 14	<p style="text-align: center;">FINAL PAPERS DUE BY 5 PM BY DIGITAL DROPBOX</p>