



EN 584: Science Fiction: Past Futures  
Fall 2009: Monday 3-4:40 p.m.  
Carney 307

Professor Judith Wilt@bc.edu  
Carney 436, 2-3702  
Office hours: Tuesday 10-12,  
Wednesday 1-3 and by appointment

This course is a Seminar, where the student participants are partners with each other and the teacher in a learning enterprise based on discussion and the sharing of knowledges. In addition to weekly common readings, participants will research, in groups, some chosen examples of the genre we are studying, and share the results with the class. Participants will also share responsibility for leading discussions on the weekly readings. Writing assignments will include: 1) “notes toward” your assigned discussion facilitation and your chosen presentation, which I’ll collect, 2) a set of brief essays at midterm which I’ll assign as a take-home exam, 3) a substantial paper, 10-12 pages long, on a chosen text or texts from class or from your presentation or possibly from a private enthusiasm of yours, approved in discussion with me, and 4) a final take-home essay looking back over two or three texts from the course.

There will be a good deal of choice in the writing for this course, which makes sense for this subject, since “science fiction,” a “remix” genre with romance, fantasy, history, horror, Gothic, allegory, scientific and philosophic, suspense and detective elements, is fundamentally a product of popular choices and even, before Academics laid hands on it, of popular history and criticism. Our common experience in the course is reading, but our common experience of the genre outside the course includes many visual and graphic cultural products, which I expect may be the subject of discussion and presentations along the way: the four-film series “Alien” will therefore be one of our class texts. We’ll also have a pizza party the first week of classes to watch some scenes from various films of what some would call the “Mother” story, *Frankenstein*: if the class wishes, we can do more of this.

#### *SCHEDULE OF READINGS, DISCUSSIONS, ASSIGNMENTS*

First week of classes, pizza party to meet and greet, share our experiences, if any, with the texts of science fiction in its range from fantasy and magic through ‘space opera’ to ‘hard’ science fiction, and watch some scenes from classic and recent films of *Frankenstein*: time/place TBA.

Mon. Sept. 14

H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895), ‘scientific romance’ and Darwinian anxiety, the imagination of ‘the end’ in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826) and Olaf Stapledon’s *Last and First Men* (1930). Organizing presentations and other responsibilities.

Mon. Sept. 21

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), historical connections and biochemical 'comfort'—defining the human.

Mon. Sept. 18

Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1940's-1951), American scenes at mid-century, aliens and alienation.

Mon. Oct. 5

Arthur Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953), Cold War interrupted.

Week of October 12

No meeting, but **Alien on BC TV this week: be sure to watch at least once:** also, visit my office once for choice essays for midterm take-home exam and a second time to hand back the essays.

Mon. Oct. 19

Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), ecology and jihad...pre Earth Day, pre 9/11.

**Discuss Alien**

Mon. Oct. 26

*Dune*, continued.

Mon. Nov. 2

Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1973), ecology again, and gender.

**AlienS on BC TV; be sure to watch.**

Mon. Nov. 9

Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's *The Mote in God's Eye* (1974), space opera, aliens and ourselves. And gender. **Discuss AlienS.**

Mon. Nov. 16

*Mote*, continued. **Alien3 on BC TV; be sure to watch.**

Mon. Nov. 23

William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), cyberpunk. (Preparation – go to YouTube for a look at the most famous TV advertisement of all time, the Apple McIntosh 1984 commercial.) **Discuss Alien3.**

Mon. Nov. 30

Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* (1996). Jesuits in space? You bet! (Preparation—google Arthur C. Clarke's "The Star," short (very short) story from 1955).

**Alien Resurrection on BC TV; be sure to watch.**

Mon. Dec. 7

Finale: **Discuss Alien Resurrection;** current short stories to be handed out, presentations, critical paper first deadline, final exam essay instruction handed out. **Deadline for**

**handing in final exam essay, second and final deadline for critical paper, Tues. Dec. 15, 9-12 in my office.**

Books of history and criticism about science fiction on reserve in O'Neill Library; consult any or all of them as you read the books, prepare your discussion and presentation responsibilities, and especially, as you muse about a topic for your critical paper:

Mark Brake and Neil Hook, *Different Engines: How Science Drives Fiction and Fiction Drives Science* (2008) PN3433.6 B73 2008

Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (2006) PN 3433.8 R55 2006

*The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (2003) PN3377.5 S3 C26 2003

Christine Cornea, *Science Fiction Cinema* (2007) PN 1995.9 S26 C67 2007

*Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (2006)

Thomas Disch, *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (1998) PN3433.5 D57 1998

Mary Shelley (1797-1851)

*Frankenstein* (1818) Forced by the (male) Creature he has brought to life to make him a female as his companion, the scientist Victor Frankenstein muses in his laboratory as he is about to complete the female Creature:

“I was now about to form another being of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness. He had sworn to quit the neighborhoods of man and hide himself in deserts, but she had not; and she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation. They might even hate each other....Even if they were to leave Europe and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of evils would be propagated upon the earth who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. Had I a right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations?...”

*The Last Man* (1826)

In 1818 the writer comes upon a series of mysterious manuscripts in many languages in a cave among the volcanic and ruinous landscapes near Naples. Attempting to translate these “prophecies,” she produces a story “transfigured” by her own imagination, a “history” written by a traveler, Lionel Verney, who lives in the last part of the twenty-first century and is witnessing the end of civilization, destroyed first by war and then by war’s companion, Plague. The war is a product of both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ human impulses – the struggle against “oriental” despotisms by Greek and Anglo-Saxon democratic ideals, corruption of individual and political ideals by egotism, blind aggression, and

possessive greed: it culminates in a disastrous battle in Constantinople, from which the Plague spreads finally to infect all mankind. Lionel Verney runs before it through many scenes of abandonment and destruction, to survive finally in the deserted “eternal” city of Rome as the “last man,” who nevertheless writes the story of his civilization’s end as a warning, and as a “record” of his own existence.

After the battle: “During the busy day, my mind had yielded itself a willing slave to the state of things presented to it by its fellow-beings; historical association, hatred of the foe, and military enthusiasm had held dominion over me. Now, I looked on the evening star, as softly and calmly it hung pendulous in the orange hues of sunset. I turned to the corpse-strewn earth, and felt ashamed of my species....Suddenly I heard a piercing shriek; a form seemed to rise from the earth. The dress of this person was that of a soldier, but the bared neck and arms, and the continued shrieks discovered a female thus disguised...In wild delirium she called upon the name of Raymond.... ‘This is the end of love! Yet not the end. Many living deaths have I borne for thee, O Raymond, and now I expire, thy victim! By my death I purchase thee—lo the instruments of war, fire, the plague are my servitors. I have sold myself to death, with the sole condition that thou shouldst follow me—Fire, war and plague, unite for thy destruction. O my Raymond, there is no safety for thee!’...I awoke from disturbed dreams: to my diseased fancy my friend’s shape altered by a thousand distortions, expanded into a gigantic phantom, bearing on its brow the sign of pestilence. The growing shadow rose and rose, filling and then seeming to endeavour to burst beyond, the adamant vault that bent over, sustaining and enclosing the world.”

Olaf Stapledon (1886-1950)

*Last and First Men* (1930) It is two BILLION years in the future. During that time, under the biological urge to survive and the psychological urge to understand and experience all possible forms of individual and collective activity, humankind has evolved or self-designed SEVENTEEN successive versions of “man” – some that flew, some that atrophied the body and magnified the head, some that incorporated genes from animals or even Martians, some that accidentally self-destructed and some that were deliberately ended in favor of another human form. The Seventeenth Men have achieved a balanced mosaic among integrally human traits: through the functioning of 96-member “groups” which function as empathetic and multi-sexual collectivities the Seventeenth men are both rational and imaginative, personal and mutual, nurturing and aggressive, fatalistic yet also aspiring. Now, however, a massive collapse of the matter of the galaxy threatens to end life and humanity. A “seed plasm” has been constructed to carry life beyond the known universe, but the seeds have had to be made so “adaptive” to so many possible material conditions in other universes that the odds are greatly against the likelihood that what grows from them will be in any meaningful sense “human.” Contemplating their end as a species, the Seventeenth and Last Men telepathically “inspire” the philosopher from First Men times, Olaf Stapledon, who thinks he is writing a work of fiction, to contemplate the trajectory of history from the 1930’s onward, the trajectory that makes up the long human “moment” in the even longer and unimaginably varied adventure of “life” itself.

Putting on record its own appreciation for this human “moment,” questioning the meaning of its fate even as it admiringly accepts it, the Last Men muse on this meaning:

“Yet though we are not at all dismayed by our own extinction, we cannot but wonder whether or not in the far future some other spirit will fulfill the cosmic ideal, or whether we ourselves are the modest crown of existence. Unfortunately, though we can explore the past wherever there are intelligible minds, we cannot enter into the future. And so in vain we ask, will ever any spirit awake to gather all spirits into itself, to elicit from the stars their full flower of beauty, to know all things together, and admire all things justly? If in the far future this end will be achieved, it is really achieved even now; for whenever it occurs, its being is eternal. But on the other hand, if it is indeed achieved eternally, this achievement must be the work of spirits or a spirit not wholly unlike ourselves, though infinitely greater. But if no future spirit will achieve this end before it dies, then, though the cosmos is indeed very beautiful, it is not perfect.

Even as individuals, all our desires are tempered by that relentless admiration of fate which we recognize as the spirit's highest achievement. Even as individuals, we exult in the issue whether our enterprises succeed or fail. The pioneer defeated, the lover bereaved and overwhelmed, can find in his disaster the supreme experience, the dispassionate ecstasy which salutes the Real as it is and would not change one jot of it. Even as individuals, we can regard the impending extinction of mankind as a thing superb though tragic. But there is the one thought by which, in our individual state, we are still dismayed, namely that the cosmos enterprise itself may fail; that the full potentiality of the Real may never find expression, that the spirit's eternal nature, therefore, should be discordant, miserably tranced. But in the racial mind this ultimate dread has no place. On those few occasions when we have awakened racially, we have come to regard with piety even the possibility of cosmical defeat. For though the racial mind wills the fulfillment of the cosmical ideal, yet in the same act it holds itself aloof from it, and from all desire, and all emotion, save the ecstasy which admires the Real as it is, and accepts its dark-bright form with joy.

Not for any human mind to say authoritatively, ‘This is music wholly,’ or to say, ‘This is mere noise, flecked now and then by shreds of significance.’ Whether these manifold interdeterminations are after all haphazard, or, as in music, controlled in relation to the beauty of the whole, we know not; nor whether, if this is the case, the beautiful whole of things is the work of some mind; nor yet whether some mind admires it adequately as a whole of beauty.

Is the beauty of the Whole really enhanced by our agony? And is the Whole really beautiful? One thing is certain. Man himself, at the very least, is music, a brave theme that makes music also of its vast accompaniment, its matrix of storms and stars. Man himself in his degree is eternally a beauty in the eternal form of things. It is very good to have been man.”