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Spring 2-1-2019

LIT 370.01: Science Fiction

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Recommended Citation

Browning, Robert, "LIT 370.01: Science Fiction" (2019). *Syllabi*. 9804.
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Science Fiction (LIT 370): Alternate Realities | Spring 2019

Rob Browning

M,W 2:00-3:20

LA 106

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Office hours (LA 217): MWF 10-11; MW 12:00-1:00 and by appointment

“If I could have said it non-metaphorically, I would not have written all these words, this novel; and Genly Ai would never have sat down at my desk and used up my ink and typewriter ribbon in informing me, and you, rather solemnly, that the truth is a matter of the imagination.”

– Ursula K. Le Guin, Introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*

“She cut through worlds, and joined them—that’s the important part—so that both became bigger.”

– Samuel R. Delany, *Babel-17*

Donnie Darko: Why are you wearing that stupid bunny suit?

Frank: Why are you wearing that stupid man suit?

– from *Donnie Darko*

In this class we will study a variety of ways authors of science fiction (or speculative fiction or SF) engage our imaginations by way of constructing radically alternate realities. The texts we study will serve as representatives of several of the major varieties of this broad kind of SF—works that play in thought-provoking ways with evolution, history, sexuality and gender, biophysics, the fourth dimension, linguistics, or alien scenarios. We will test Darko Suvin’s thesis that SF’s estranging departures from the norms of reality not only enable “the mind to receive new wavelengths,” but also contribute “to the understanding of the most mundane matters.” Along the way, we will consider the modern history of science fiction’s status as an “alternate reality” of its own, relative to the kinds of fiction that have been more readily welcomed into college curricula—what Samuel Delaney has called (tongue not firmly in cheek) “mundane fiction.” I hope you’ll emerge at the end of this semester with a substantial list of authors you’re interested in reading further.

Required Texts:

- H.P. Lovecraft, *The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Stories* (Penguin, ISBN: 978-0-14-218003-7)
- Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* (Mariner, ISBN: 9780547572482)
- Samuel Delany, *Babel-17* (Vintage, ISBN: 9780375706691)
- Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Ace, ISBN: 9780441478125)
- Arthur C. Clarke, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Penguin, ISBN: 978-0451457998)
- Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (Farrar, ISBN: 9780374104092)

Graded Work:

Five response papers -----	30
Formal essay -----	30
Final project -----	30

Attendance.

I become concerned if you miss more than three classes, and expect anyone in this position to see me so we may discuss your status in the class. Ordinarily, each absence beyond four will reduce the final grade by one-third of a letter grade. It is not possible to pass this class having missed more than six classes.

Please arrive to class on time.

While I understand that the most conscientious of us sometimes are delayed by circumstances beyond our control (and in those cases, please do come to class rather than not at all), persistent late arrivals are a distraction. You may dismiss yourself during class time, but, please, only if you have an urgent reason to do so.

Participation:

Exploring literature in the company of other readers is an opportunity to learn about the texts in ways that we never could as solitary individuals. Our classes will be successful to the extent that each of you keeps up with the readings and contributes to our discussions. My sense of your level of participation is based on your attendance, how well you appear to be keeping up with reading assignments, your contributions to class discussions, and any discussions you and I have beyond class time

Essays:

1) Response papers. These are informal, one page, single-spaced explorations of some aspect of a text we have read recently. A total of five are required – one for each of the major texts, with the sixth one optional. You may, if you like, substitute a film or short story for any of these papers. Each is due one class meeting after we have finished the work you're discussing (if we wrap up class discussion of *Babel-17* on March 4, your paper is due the next class: April 6). You should use these papers to help you think through your own interpretations of the texts and as forums for generating interesting questions and topics you might pursue in either of your two formal papers. Otherwise, you have considerable freedom in how you go about these papers. My evaluation of response papers will focus on your apparent level of engagement with the literature.

2) Formal essay. An essay of six or more double-spaced pages on a topic relevant to our readings that interests you. I encourage you to use secondary sources that can help you develop your thinking about the topic. To earn a grade of "C" or higher, your essay must have a strong, clearly stated thesis—which is to say, a focused claim and the main reason why you think it is valid. A strong thesis is not self-evident; it will require the work of your full essay to demonstrate and support convincingly.

3) Final project. You will have the option of writing either a scholarly paper or composing a creative project that draws upon (or in some way engages with) texts we have studied.

Presentation:

With the aid of one or two of your classmates, you will be called upon to give a presentation on a focused topic that contributes to our study of alternate realities in science fiction. After the presentation groups are established, you'll have the option of choosing from a list of topics or devising a topic of your own. In any case, your presentation should involve good, scholarly research and you should aim to engage the class in some way. No later than one class after you have presented, your group should send me a document that summarizes the contents of your presentation, highlighting the ideas you think are most interesting or important. You should include a bibliography at the end of this document. I will make these documents accessible to the class by posting them on Moodle.

Academic Honesty:

Plagiarism is a violation of scholarly trust. According to the Provost, "Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code. The Code is available for review online at <http://www.umt.edu/SA/VP/SA/index.cfm/page/1321>." Violators of the Student Conduct Code will receive an "F" for the offending paper.

According to the pace of our discussions, we will deviate from the following schedule from time to time. At the beginning or end of each class I will confirm the assignment for the next class. It's important that you exchange contact information with one of your classmates. Anytime you miss a class you should get in touch with that person to learn if there have been any changes to the schedule.

- 1/14 Mon. Introductions; opening questions of the course
1/16 Weds. H. P. Lovecraft, "The Music of Erich Zann" (1922) (on Moodle) and "At the Mountains of Madness" (1931/36)
- 1/21 Mon. **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day - no class**
1/23 Weds. "At the Mountains of Madness"
- 1/28 Mon. *The Wizard of Oz* (1939); Salman Rushdie's essay on the film (Moodle)
1/30 Weds. Robert A. Heinlein, "All You Zombies—" (1959); Kate Wilhelm, "Forever Yours, Anna" (1987) (both on Moodle)
- 2/2 Sat. Watch *Groundhog Day!* (1993) (a recommendation)
- 2/4 Mon. Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* (1962)
2/6 Weds. *The Man in the High Castle*
- 2/11 Mon. *The Man in the High Castle*
2/13 Weds. *The Man in the High Castle*
- 2/18 Mon. **Presidents' Day - no class**
2/20 Weds. Samuel R. Delany, *Babel-17*
- 2/25 Mon. *Babel-17*
2/27 Weds. *Babel-17*
- 3/4 Mon. Arthur C. Clarke, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)
3/6 Weds. Clarke, *2001: A Space Odyssey*
- 3/11 Mon. Stanley Kubrick and Clarke, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)
3/13 Weds. James Tiptree, Jr., "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" (1976) (on Moodle)
- 3/18 Mon. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)
3/20 Weds. *The Left Hand of Darkness*
- 3/25-29 **Spring break - no classes**
- 4/1 Mon. *The Left Hand of Darkness*; Le Guin, "Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown" (Moodle)
4/3 Weds. *The Left Hand of Darkness*

4/8 Mon. Octavia Butler, "Bloodchild" (1984)

4/10 Weds. *Donnie Darko* (2001)

4/15 Mon. Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (2014)

4/17 Weds. *Annihilation*

4/22 Mon. *Annihilation*

4/24 Weds. Conclusions and extrapolations.

Final project due Monday, April 29 by closing time. There is no final exam for this class.