Stockholm University

Science Fiction in Literary History and Popular Culture (ENGESF)
Online Course
15 credits
Spring 2025
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Course description

The aim of this course is to help undergraduate students to develop advanced skills for reading and analysing English-language literature. The focus is on a selection of canonised and popular science fiction works mainly from the Anglophone cultural sphere.

The course roughly follows an historically chronological structure beginning with early works, some even published before the genre existed as such. Some of the texts will work as comments on earlier texts, adding cultural dimensions and opening for the potential of new readings.

Central to "Science Fiction in Literary History and Popular Culture" is to follow the genre's progress and also explore the different themes that have developed both within the primary works themselves and as part of the scholarly work growing alongside the development through time.

In addition, critical texts serve as points of entry for discussion of the texts as well as functioning as introductions for the students to the different approaches of critical analysis. Overarching themes and ideological aspects—such as Marxist theory, gender, race, postmodernism and queer—will be explored and discussed throughout the course.

Intended learning outcomes

Upon completion of the course, students are expected to be able to:

- Account for the contents of the course literature;
- Display the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods relevant for the science fiction genre;
- Apply critical concepts to the texts within the genre;
- Analyse texts within the genre from a relevant theoretical perspective;
- Motivate their own analyses in writing in a manner relevant to the field;
- Display a good understanding of written English and express themselves in academic English.

Grading

The course adopts the 7-grade SU scale (A–F). To receive a final grade, students must have completed all obligatory elements and the examination assignments [not fulfilled the obligatory elements or not done all examination assignments=no grade].
To receive a passing grade (A to E), students must complete and pass all the examination assignments, and thus demonstrate that they achieved all the learning outcomes at least at the minimum level (see "Course grading criteria" below).

Course activities

The course consists of the following activities:

- Twelve seminars, all of which involve active participation from the students. Seminar 6 is an examination seminar in which everyone presents their essay topics. There will be an opportunity for a re-take. Attendance at 75% of the seminars (i.e. 9 seminars) is obligatory, and you can make up in writing for only 4 of these seminars. Instructions for the make-up work can be found on Athena.
- The students will read primary texts and secondary material before each seminar. They will discuss the material in groups, in and outside of class, using these meetings as occasions to reflect upon and voice their ideas about their reading of primary texts and understanding of the secondary material.

- Students are asked to give oral presentations in three of the seminars (however, only the essay topic presentation on seminar 6 is mandatory and it will be graded PASS or FAIL).

Examination

Students are required to complete the following:

- Oral presentation (Pass/Fail): Essay Topic, in Seminar 6
- Essay (A-F): 2000 words, 100% of the final grade.
- Meet the attendance requirement (see "Course activities").

Required reading

Literary texts

Atwood, Margaret, *The Handmaid's Tale*
Atwood, Margaret, *Oryx and Crake*
Bacon, Francis, *New Atlantis* [Excerpt]
Callenbach, Ernest, *Ecotopia*
Gibson, William, *Neuromancer*
Hawthorne, Nathaniel, "The Birthmark" [Athena]
Heinlein, Robert A., *Starship Troopers*
Kepler, Johannes, *Somnium* [Excerpt]
Le Guin, Ursula, *The Left Hand of Darkness*
Orwell, George, *1984*
Poe, Edgar Allan, "Sonnet – To Science" [Athena]
Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein*
Wells, H.G., *The Time Machine*

Films
Lang, Fritz, *Metropolis*
Tarkovsky, Andrei, *Solaris*,

Critical texts
The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction, Edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn

Student's Choice. Anyone or several of these works. For the essay and oral presentation in seminar 6:
Arnason, Eleanor, *Ring of Swords*
Atwood, Margaret, *The Testament: The Sequel to The Handmaid's Tale*
Ballard, J.G., *The Drought*
Dick, Philip K., *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*
Huxley, Aldous, *Brave New World*
Vonnegut, Kurt, *Cat's Cradle*
Wells, H.G., *The War of the Worlds*
Whitehead, Colson, *Zone One*

Oral Presentation Seminar 6 and Course essay

In preparation:

Choose anyone of the works in the course reading (including the Student's Choice list) for presentation and for the course essay. You can choose more than one work if you want to do a comparative or thematic analysis.

Choose one of the Critical approaches from Part 2 of the Cambridge Companion.

Marxist theory
Feminist theory
Postmodernism
Queer theory

In seminar 6, present a plan for an analysis of your chosen primary source.
Present central theory and concepts.
Explain why this critical approach works well with your novel.
Show some examples of what you will analyse more closely in the course essay.

Aim for about 10 mins of presentation. Use a few slides, so it is easier to follow your presentation.

SEMINAR SCHEDULE

SEMINAR 1 Introduction "Science fiction before the genre"
Ch 1 *Cambridge*, *New Atlantis*, *Somnium*, "Sonnet – To Science", "The Birthmark", *The Time Machine*

SEMINAR 2 "The magazine era"
Ch 2 *Cambridge*, search the internet for examples of magazines, prepare a 10 min presentation of your chosen magazine in class
http://www.luminist.org/archives/periodicals_index.htm

SEMINAR 3 "New Wave and backwash"
Ch 3 *Cambridge*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

SEMINAR 4 "Science Fiction from the 1980s to the present"
Ch 4 *Cambridge*, *Neuromancer*, *Oryx and Crake*

SEMINAR 5 "Film and television"
Ch 5 *Cambridge*, *Metropolis* and *Solaris*

SEMINAR 6 "Critical approaches"
The whole of Part 2 in *Cambridge* (pp. 113–60)
Oral presentation of Essay Topic (see essay instructions), this oral presentation is MANDATORY (you must do it to be able to pass the course), graded PASS/FAIL

SEMINAR 7 "The icons of science fiction" and "Science fiction and the life sciences"
Ch 11 and 12 in *Cambridge*, *Frankenstein*

SEMINAR 8 "Hard science fiction" and "Space opera"
Ch 13 and 14 in *Cambridge*, *Starship Troopers*

SEMINAR 9 "Alternate History" and "Utopias and anti-utopias"
Ch 15 and 16 in *Cambridge*, *Ecotopia*

SEMINAR 10 "Politics in science fiction"
Ch 17, 18, 19 in *Cambridge*, *1984*

SEMINAR 11 "Religion and science fiction"
Ch 20 in *Cambridge*, *The Handmaid's Tale*

SEMINAR 12 Presentations. 10 minutes course summaries (not mandatory, will not be graded). Re-take Oral presentation (if you missed seminar 6).

DEADLINE ESSAY June 9, 23.59
For the essay you work on the novel/s you have chosen, you can also choose freely from the whole course content if you want to add more context. You can use other secondary material than *Cambridge* but that is not a requirement.
2000 words, graded A-F, 100% of the final grade. Use the Style Sheet for literary essays [Athena].

Re-take essay: 15 Aug by midnight.
Re-take Oral presentation on Seminar 12

Course grading criteria

	A	B	C	D	E	Fx	F
	excellent skills in	**very good skills in**	**good skills in**	**satisfactory skills in**	**adequate skills in**	**Fail**	**Fail**
Overview of material	account for the contents of the course literature	account for the contents of the course literature	account for the contents of the course literature	account for the contents of the course literature	account for the contents of the course literature	The student has displayed some, but not all, of the skills of the level of the criteria for E.	The student's work does not demonstrate the achievement of the course outcomes at a minimally adequate level.
Discussion	displaying the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods in the field, and applying these concepts to texts	displaying the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods in the field, and applying these concepts to texts	displaying the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods in the field, and applying these concepts to texts	displaying the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods in the field, and applying these concepts to texts	displaying the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods in the field, and applying these concepts to texts		
Analysis	analysing texts from a relevant theoretical perspective critically, and motivating their own analyses in writing in a manner relevant to the field	analysing texts from a relevant theoretical perspective critically, and motivating their own analyses in writing in a manner relevant to the field	analysing texts from a relevant theoretical perspective critically, and motivating their own analyses in writing in a manner relevant to the field	analysing texts from a relevant theoretical perspective critically, and motivating their own analyses in writing in a manner relevant to the field	analysing texts from a relevant theoretical perspective critically, and motivating their own analyses in writing in a manner relevant to the field		
Comprehension	displaying a good understanding of	displaying a good understanding	displaying a good understanding	displaying a good understanding	displaying a good understanding of written English		

	written English	of written English	of written English	of written English			
Expression	express-ing them-selves in academic English	express-ing them-selves in academic English	express-ing them-selves in academic English	express-ing them-selves in academic English	expressing themselves in academic English		

NB: *If the work submitted is close to a passing grade (E) but not sufficient, the student will receive an Fx.*

ORAL PRESENTATION ASSIGNMENT

Grading criteria (oral presentation)

Criteria	**Pass**	**Fail**
Content	The presentation introduces the topic of the presentation in a clear and concise manner demonstrating the student's understanding of the textual and theoretical issues discussed. These issues are presented and discussed in a lucid manner.	In the presentation the student does not demonstrate a sufficient understanding of the textual and theoretical issues discussed. These issues are not presented and discussed in an adequate manner.
Organisation and language	The presentation is well structured and easy to follow. The language used is academic and does not contain any severe mistakes.	The organisation of the presentation is poor, and the language used contains several mistakes.