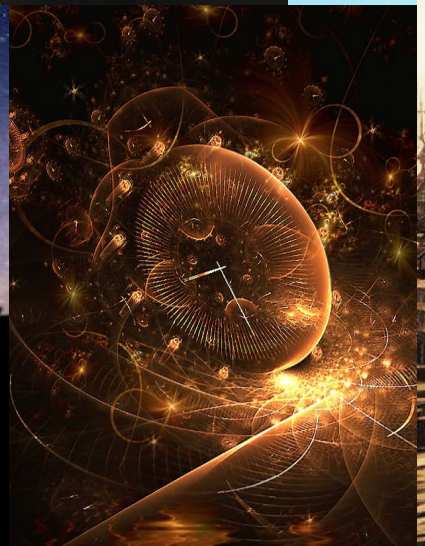
Science Fiction



UDLS Jan 7, 2015
Neil Newman

Undergraduate

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ENG237H1S L5101

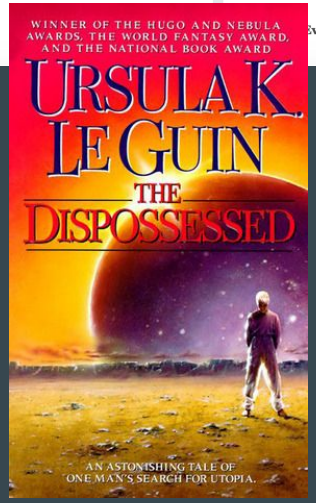
ENG237H1S L5101 W6-9
Science Fiction
Instructor: Dr. M. Johnstone
Office Location: Jackman Humanities Building, Room 803
Email: m.johnstone@utoronto.ca

Brief Description of Course: This course will treat science fiction (SF) as a significant literature and tradition that has reflected and responded to our rapidly changing modern world in distinct ways since the late 19th century. During the term, we will attempt to develop a working definition of science fiction not just by identifying its tropes and conventions, but also by understanding what it does that sets it apart from other genres and from mainstream literature. To do so, we will explore themes of the encounter with the alien (or, Other), dystopia/utopia and apocalypse, and subjectivity and identity, as well as consider the influence of the medium of science fiction (i.e., short stories, novels, graphic novels, film) upon how we define and identify the genre. Overall, we will approach SF as a literature of critique that explores challenging and profound questions about the human condition.

Required Reading: TBA.

First Three Authors/Texts: TBA.

Evaluation: In-class test 1 (20%)



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Science fiction

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

For other uses, see Science fiction (disambiguation).
"Sci Fi", "Scifi", and "Sci-Fi" redirect here. For other uses, see Scifi (disambiguation).

Science fiction is a genre of speculative fiction dealing with imaginative concepts such as futuristic settings, futuristic science and technology, space travel, time travel, faster than light travel, parallel universes and extraterrestrial life. Science fiction often explores the potential consequences of scientific and other innovations, and has been called a "literature of ideas."[1] It usually eschews the supernatural, and unlike the related genre of fantasy, historically science fiction stories were intended to have at least a faint grounding in science-based fact or theory at the time the story was created, but this connection has become tenuous or non-existent in much of science fiction.[2][3][4]

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Speculative Fiction

Speculative fiction

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Speculative fiction portal

v · t · e

What is Science Fiction?

- "Realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method." - Robert A. Heinlein
- "A conscientious attempt to be faithful to already known facts (as of the date of writing) [is] the substrate on which the story was built, and if the story was also to contain a miracle, it ought at least not to contain a whole arsenal of them." - James Benjamin Blish
- "By 'scientifiction' I mean the Jules Verne, H. G. Wells and Edgar Allan Poe type of story—a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision." - Hugo Gernsback (credited with the term Science Fiction)
- "Science fiction is what we point to when we say it" - Damon Knight

Common Tropes and Subgenres

- Futuristic settings
- Planets / Space Travel / Aliens / Androids / Mutants / Robots
- Teleportation, FTL
- Mind control / Telepathy / Telekinesis
- Utopias / Dystopias
- Cyberpunk / Biopunk
- Time Travel & Alternate History
- Superhuman
- Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic
- Space Opera / Space Western
- Climate Fiction
- Kaiju (strange beast)
- Steampunk
- More

Science Fiction and Fantasy

- Fantasy \subset Science Fiction?
- SF concerns what might one day be possible, pretense of realism
- “Fantasy is the impossible made probable. Science fiction is the improbable made possible." - Rod Serling
- It’s a pretty blurry line, with many authors spanning both genres

Hard vs Soft Science Fiction

- Definition 1: Scientific Rigour
  - **HARD**: "Written to a high degree of conformance with current scientific knowledge, where all extrapolation of new phenomena is plausible, self consistent, and limited in number and/or scope as to not reduce its effects to arbitrariness. The plot should center around the exploration of a scientific phenomenon, its applications, or generally the application of science and engineering to the solution of problems." - Christian Weisgerber
  - **SOFT**: Does not offer any scientific or technical explanation for how things work, or only offers pseudo-explanation / technical mumbo jumbo
- Definition 2: Type of Science
  - **HARD**: deals with natural sciences e.g. physics, astrophysics, and chemistry

    SOFT: deals with social sciences e.g. such as psychology, economics, political science,sociology, and anthropology

Novum

- Latin for “new thing”
- "A discrete piece of information recognizable as not-true, but also as not-unlike-true, not-flatly- (and in the current state of knowledge) impossible." - Darko Suvin
- Cognitive estrangement
- Examples: time machine, worldwide sterility, hyperintelligent AI

Is Science Fiction Literary Fiction?

- SF is often dismissed as “genre fiction” and escapist
- “Is its readership still dominated by male adolescents, is it a taste which will appeal to the mature but non-eccentric literary mind?” - Tom Shippey
- Authors will go out of their way to not brand their books as SF (even though they obviously are) just to not get stocked in the “SF” shelves at stores
    - e.g. Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake

Why Read Science Fiction?

Science fiction is often described, and even defined, as extrapolative. The science fiction writer is supposed to take a trend or phenomenon of the here-and-now, purify and intensify it for dramatic effect, and extend it into the future. "If this goes on, this is what will happen." A prediction is made. Method and results much resemble those of a scientist who feeds large doses of a purified and concentrated food additive to mice, in order to predict what may happen to people who eat it in small quantities for a long time. The outcome seems almost inevitably to be cancer. So does the outcome of extrapolation. Strictly extrapolative works of science fiction generally arrive about where the Club of Rome arrives: somewhere between the gradual extinction of human liberty and the total extinction of terrestrial life.

Ursula K. Le Guin
The Left Hand of Darkness
Introduction

Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive.

Yes, indeed the people in [The Left Hand of Darkness] are androgynous, but that doesn't mean that I'm predicting that in a millennium or so we will all be androgynous, or announcing that I think we damned well ought to be androgynous. I'm merely observing, in the peculiar, devious, and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction, that if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers, we already are. I am not predicting, or prescribing. I am describing.

The weather bureau will tell you what next Tuesday will be like, and the Rand Corporation will tell you what the twenty-first century will be like. I don't recommend that you turn to the writers of fiction for such information. It's none of their business. All they're trying to do is tell you what they're like, and what you're like - what's going on - what the weather is now, today, this moment, the rain, the sunlight, look! Open your eyes; listen, listen. That is what the novelists say. But they don't tell you what you will see and hear. All they can tell you is what they have seen and heard, in their time in this world

Ursula K. Le Guin
The Left Hand of Darkness
Introduction

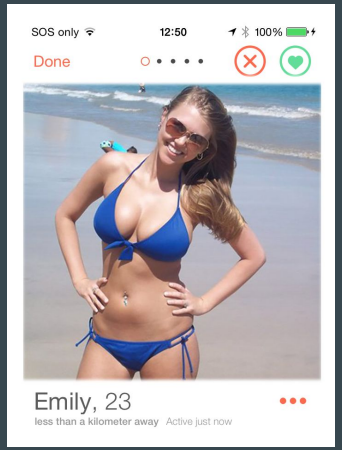
PEOPLE WHO LIKED
ALSO LIKED

An example:
Liking What You See: A Documentary
Ted Chiang

- Centers around a university's petition to make all students wear "calli", a device that makes the wearer agnostic to pretty faces

The deeper societal problem is lookism. For decades people've been willing to talk about racism and sexism, but they're still reluctant to talk about lookism. Yet this prejudice against unattractive people is incredibly pervasive. People do it without even being taught by anyone, which is bad enough, but instead of combating this tendency, modern society actively reinforces it.

Educating people, raising their awareness about this issue, all of that is essential, but it's not enough. That's where technology comes in. Think of calliagnosia as a kind of assisted maturity. It lets you do what you know you should: ignore the surface, so you can look deeper.

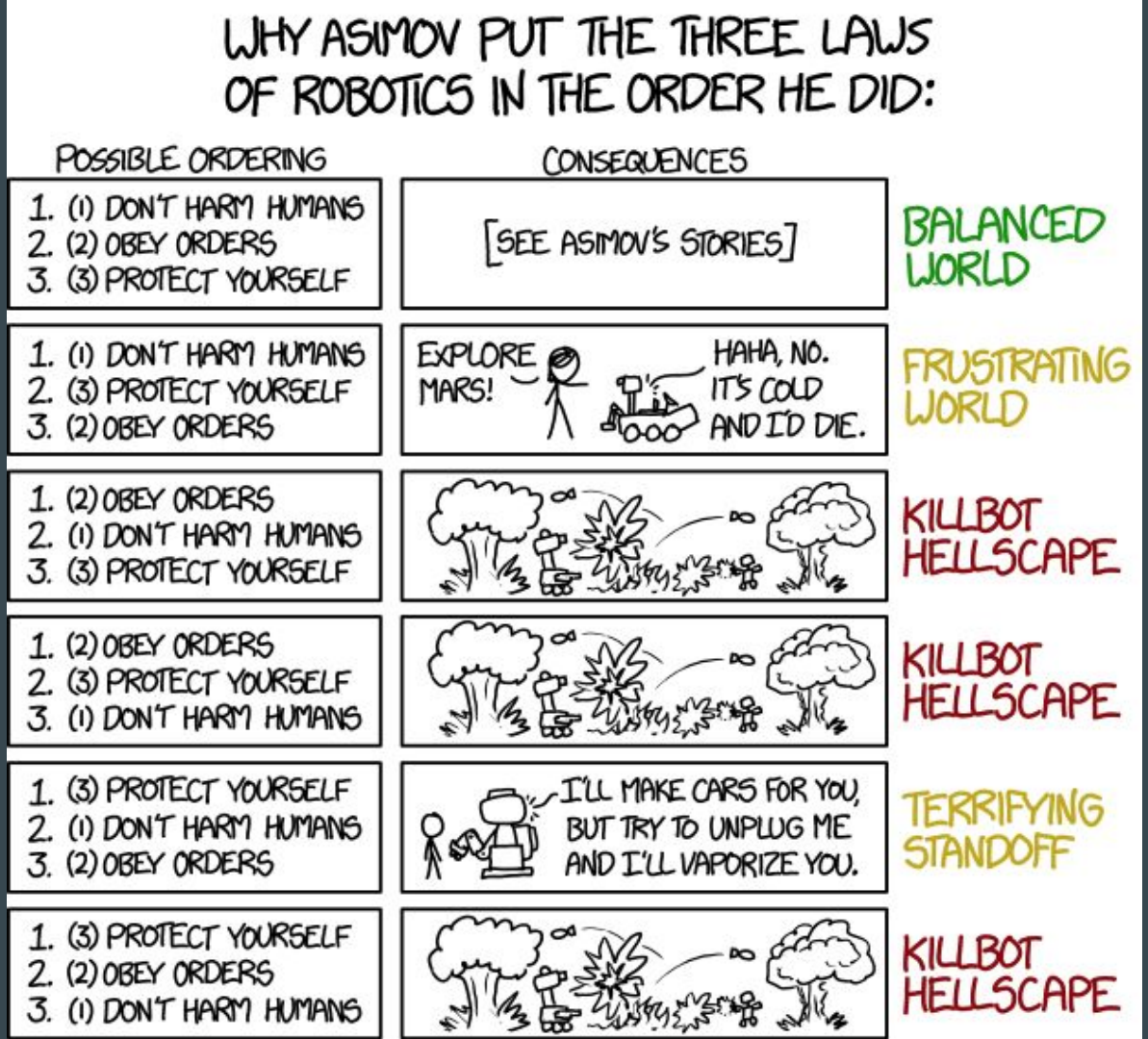


Calliagnosia is possible because of the existence of certain neural pathways in the brain. All animals have criteria for evaluating the reproductive potential of prospective mates, and they've evolved neural "circuitry" to recognize those criteria. Human social interaction is centered around our faces, so our circuitry is most finely attuned to how a person's reproductive potential is manifested in his or her face. You experience the operation of that circuitry as the feeling that a person is beautiful, or ugly, or somewhere in between. By blocking the neural pathways dedicated to evaluating those features, we induce calliagnosia.

Inducing an agnosia means simulating a specific brain lesion. We do this with a programmable pharmaceutical called neurostat; you can think of it as a highly selective anesthetic, one whose activation and targeting are all under dynamic control. We activate or deactivate the neurostat by transmitting signals through a helmet the patient puts on. The helmet also provides somatic positioning information so the neurostat molecules can triangulate their location. This lets us activate only the neurostat in a specific section of brain tissue, and keep the nerve impulses there below a specified threshold.

SF and Diversity

- "The women's movement has made most of us conscious of the fact that SF has either totally ignored women, or presented them as squeaking dolls subject to instant rape by monsters – or old-maid scientists desexed by hypertrophy of the intellectual organs – or, at best, loyal little wives or mistresses of accomplished heroes" - Ursula K Le Guin
- Hugo Awards 2015 “Sad Puppies”



Thanks for listening!