

A Virtual Introduction to Science Fiction




ZEIT UND ORT

03.04.12–10.07.12
 dienstags
 18–20 Uhr
 Hörsaal K
 Hauptgebäude
 Edmund-Siemers-
 Allee 1

An Online Teaching Project with Video Lectures

Countless stories in books, films, series and games make up the canon of science fiction (sf), the genre of popular literature and media that represents the success of mass culture like none other and has, especially since Hollywood discovered it (in films like “Avatar”) for its stunning creation of worlds, been growing in fan numbers by the year. Unfortunately though, even though media presence is growing and students express an interest in sf, the genre has been neglected by academia, especially in teaching. One problem might be that research in sf can mostly be found abroad and many experts teach at US institutions. This semester, the Universität Hamburg therefore

promotes an innovative teaching project which tries to rectify this situation by gathering experts of sf virtually to teach via video lecture. The project thus combines a lecture series with a classic seminar approach and allows for weekly sessions on specialized topics. Experts will give “live” talks via the net, introduce their fields of study and then answer questions from the audience. In the second part of the session, the given topic will be analyzed via exemplary short stories and the thematic concerns of the lecture brought to a practical reading. Visitors of the lectures can participate in the seminar, if they are interested in further discussion of the topics.

03.04.2012

What is Science Fiction? Some Thoughts on Genre

Prof. John Rieder, PhD, Department of English, University of Hawaii, USA

10.04.2012

Proto-Science Fiction (History of Science Fiction up to the 1900s)

Dr. Brian M. Stableford, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Reading, UK

17.04.2012

The Rise of the Pulp (1900s–1930s)

Dr. Zahra Janessari, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Tehran, Iran

24.04.2012

Golden Age of Science Fiction (1940s–1950s)

Prof. Gary Westfahl, PhD, College of Arts and Science, University of La Verne, USA

08.05.2012

New Wave of Science Fiction (1960s–1970s)

Dr. Edward Carmien, Department of English, Mercer County Community College, USA

15.05.2012

Cyberpunk (1980s–1990s)

Prof. Pawel Frelik, PhD, Department of American Literature and Culture, University of Lublin, Poland

22.05.2012

Slipstream and Crossovers (2000s)

Ass. Prof. Douglas Davis, PhD, Humanities, Fine and Performing Arts, Gordon College, USA

05.06.2012

Science Fiction as Genre Film (1920s–1960s)

Ass. Prof. Alfredo L. Suppia, PhD, Institute of Arts and Design, Federal University of Juiz de Fora, Brasil

12.06.2012

Science Fiction and New Hollywood (1970s–2000s)

Mark Bould, PhD, Department of Screen Media and Journalism, University of the West of England, UK

19.06.2012

Feminism in Science Fiction

Ass. Prof. Ritch Calvin, PhD, Department of Women’s and Gender Studies, State University of New York, Stony Brook, USA

26.06.2012

Race in Science Fiction

Ass. Prof. Lisa Yaszek, PhD, School of Literature, Communication and Culture, Georgia Institute of Technology, USA

03.07.2012

Fandom in Science Fiction

Prof. Robin Reid, PhD, Department of Literature & Languages, Texas A&M University, Commerce, USA

10.07.2012

New Media Forms of Science Fiction

Stefan Hall, PhD, Department of Communication Arts, Defiance College, USA

⇒ **KOORDINATION**

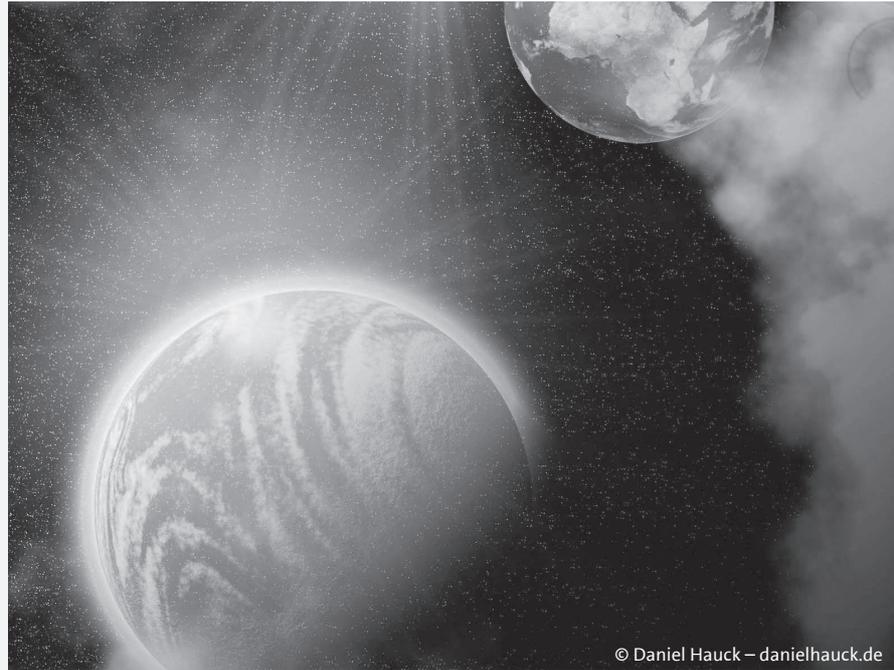
Lars Schmeink, Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Hamburg

EXTRA: “To boldly go where no man has gone before...”

Depending on how broad a definition is used, one may argue that the ideas of science fiction (sf) are as old as human storytelling. Tales of travelling to the stars can for example be found among poets of the Classical era (Lucian’s “True History” of 2nd century origin), while visions of a better world were especially popular during the Renaissance (Thomas More’s “Utopia” of 1516 naming that related genre). Most histories of science fiction will start their account with the Enlightenment, though. Sometime in the 19th century, the supernatural gave way to technological progress and human reason as main motivators for change in the human condition. James Gunn calls sf the “literature of change” and the “literature of the human species” (vii)¹ because sf does not concern itself with continuity and stability (with the past), but rather with progress and ever-new situations that human beings find themselves in (thus, with the present and the future). Technological inventions have had significant impact on our thinking and our lives and it is thanks to science fiction that we have a cultural signifier for these changes. When Mary Shelley first heard of Luigi Galvani and his dead but yet seemingly alive frogs, she felt compelled to extrapolate his experiments. She thus wrote what is today one of the most profound visions of science gone wrong and probably the first instance of a distinguishable sf: “Frankenstein”. When H.G. Wells thought about the state of the British Empire and the many colonial conflicts it was in, he could not but imagine the “what if” we were the colonized and ended up writing “War of Worlds”. But science fiction as we have come to know it is an American invention and came to pass in the pulp magazines of the 1920s and 30s, evolving from scientifically inspired adventure stories for young boys into a full-fledged genre by the 1940s. The grand masters of that time, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clark, Robert Heinlein and Frederik Pohl, took their audience on voyages to galaxies far away, presented them with technological wonders like robots, laser guns and rocket ships, and met with many an alien life form walking on strange worlds. The genre soon developed further, branching out from literature to film and television. Hollywood became interested in the possibilities of sf and produced an incredible amount of b-movies with mutants from outer space, invasions from Mars, and technologically created monsters like the Incredible Shrinking Man, the 50 Foot Woman or the Human Fly.

But sf is by far more than pulp tales or b-movies with outrageous stories and low quality. Over

the last century, it has also produced such intellectually challenging and highly aesthetic works of art as Fritz Lang’s silent movie “Metropolis” (1927), Stanley Kubrick’s avant-garde film “2001 – A Space Odyssey” (1968, based on a story by Arthur C. Clark), Philip K. Dick’s alternate-history novel “The Man in the High Castle” (1962) and William Gibson’s ground-breaking novel



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“Neuromancer” (1984). But these films and novels do not just adhere to a higher quality standard than sf is usually credited with, they have also manifested an undeniable impact on our culture. Gibson was the first to coin the term “cyberspace” and described in detail the possibilities of hacking. And the design of popular flip-phones seems oddly reminiscent of the 40 years old design of “Star Trek”’s famous ‘communicators’. Not to mention the frightening similarities of George Orwell’s double-speak to today’s political lingo, of Bradbury’s video-walls to flat screen TVs and Huxley’s Soma to drugs like Prozac or Ritalin. Science fiction is not just entertainment and escape to another world – in its best form it is prophetic warning of wrong turns ahead and a roadmap to a better world all at once.

Lars Schmeink

¹ Gunn, James. “Introduction.” *The Road to Science Fiction Vol. 1: From Gilgamesh to Wells*. Ed. James Gunn. Lanham: Scarecrow, 2002: vii–xviii.