

# ENGLISH 191

## Science Fiction

Spring 2010 - 362 Willard, 2:30-3:45pm TR

Adam Haley  
44 Burrowes / adh196@psu.edu  
<http://noendofneon.net/scifi>

Office Hours: TR 1:00-2:30pm  
and by appointment

**We live in a science-fictional universe.** We know this to be true because someone asserts it roughly every thirteen seconds. What this hypothesis suggests is not just that some of the shiny techno-fantasies of science fictions past have become parts of our day-to-day reality (cell phones for all; jetpacks for some), but rather that science fiction is now the literary and cultural formation best equipped to represent the world we inhabit. In eras past, the sea narrative or the documentary film or the soap opera or the historical novel might have been more fitting, more capable of illuminating the circumstances and problems of an era; now, though, is science fiction's time. The project of this course, then, will be to test this hypothesis, and to think about the ways in which science fiction—in addition to being endlessly fun and entertaining!—*matters*.

Science fiction has long occupied a strange, somewhat precarious position in Western culture. Popular but nerdy, lucrative but marginalized, the stuff of dreams but the butt of jokes, it is both a driving force behind literary history and a counter-tradition at the margins of that history. We will encounter works that remain squarely in the realm of "low culture," works that have ascended to "high culture," and works that fall somewhere in the middle. We will expand our internal definitions of science fiction to include more than murderous robots (though of course we have some of those), alien women in metallic bikinis (very few of those), and implausible spaceships (how could we leave those out?). We will look at science fiction as an exploration not only of new technologies and their influence on society, but of the potential changes wrought by other kinds of conditions—economic, legal, cultural, ethical, biological. We will try to think science fiction as the literature not just of the future but of the present, and we will think seriously about the rhetorical nature of the future, the influence that imagined futures can have on the contemporary world and its inhabitants.

As science fiction's cultural energy is scarcely confined to novels, we will do our best to branch out into other media. We'll read novels and short fiction by William Gibson, Octavia Butler, Philip K. Dick, James Tiptree, Jr., and other SF luminaries, but we'll also read graphic novels about technologically altered animals, watch films about alien slums and genetic sequencing, sample TV shows about deep-space travel and high-tech brothels, and even play our way through at least one physics-altering video game.

While the reading list is long as it is, numerous classic (or excellent but underappreciated) works had to be left out. I hope for this class to serve as the beginning of a love of science fiction, not the final word on the topic.

### Texts

Philip K. Dick - *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (ISBN: [0345404475](#))

William Gibson - *Neuromancer* (ISBN: [0441569595](#))

Octavia Butler - *Lilith's Brood* (ISBN: [0446676101](#))

Maureen McHugh - *China Mountain Zhang* (ISBN: [0312860986](#))

Joe Haldeman - *The Forever War* (ISBN: [0312536631](#))

Cory Doctorow - *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* (ISBN: [076530953X](#), or free [here](#))

Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely - *We3* (ISBN: [1401204953](#))

Brian K. Vaughan and Pia Guerra - *Y: The Last Man, Vol. 1: Unmanned* (ISBN: [1563899809](#))

Books available at the PSU bookstore, Amazon.com, etc. All other readings will be posted [online](#).

## Grading

Participation:	<b>20%</b>	Midterm:	<b>25%</b>
ANGEL forum:	<b>25%</b>	Final:	<b>30%</b>

**Attendance:** Regular attendance is **required**. Please come to every class, and please come on time, as a courtesy to your classmates and to me. Your grade will be lowered if your attendance is poor, down to and including "F." This is University policy. Specifically, you are permitted **two (2!)** absences. Excused absences are appropriate, but beyond that, let me repeat PSU policy (*Policies and Rules*, 42-27): a student whose absences are excessive "may run the risk of receiving a lower grade or a failing grade," whether or not some of those absences are "excused." Each day, I will circulate an attendance sheet. It will be your responsibility to sign the sheet before the end of class to be counted as present. Don't forget.

**Participation:** I want to hear from you, in whatever forms you're comfortable with. This is why participation is 20% of your course grade. Science fiction is not a dry, stodgy, solitary literature. It should elicit responses from you—emotional, ethical, intellectual, or otherwise. I realize that this is a large class, but I hope you'll nonetheless feel comfortable weighing in during class discussions, and even if you're not normally inclined to talk in class, I'd encourage you to step outside your comfort zone in this class (what is science fiction if not a systematic attempt to nudge people outside their comfort zones?). Those who still don't feel comfortable speaking up should focus extra energy on participating within the ANGEL forum (explained below), above and beyond the required weekly postings.

**ANGEL Forum:** Each week (by **noon on Thursday** at the latest), starting the second week of the semester, you are required to post a response to at least one of the week's readings on ANGEL. You may have questions or critical observations about one or more of the readings in terms of theme, character, plot, setting, and so on. Or you might relate the reading to other readings we've covered, other conversations we've had in class, or broader ethical/philosophical/literary issues in science fiction as a whole. Your response need only be a paragraph long (about five or so sentences—more than "See Spot run. See Spot board a ship and soar through space. Fly, Spot, fly!"), though if you have more to say, by all means, let fly. These short writings not only tell me that you're keeping up with the reading and thinking about the course material outside of class, they will also give me a better sense of the topics that interest and provoke you, so that our in-class discussions can be happier and more productive. (NOTE: If you want to make me really happy, start responding to and following up on each other's posts. This should be a conversation.)

**Academic Freedom:** In English classrooms, academic freedom most frequently comes up in two contexts: charges of "offensiveness" or of "brainwashing"/"indoctrination." While you have the right to be free of gratuitous insult, you do not have the right not to be offended. I mean something very specific by this: at a university, you do not have the right to be protected from words, ideas, values, or beliefs—whether conservative or liberal, religious or secular, putatively obscene, or any other category—that you find distasteful. A key part of any education is the careful scrutiny of received ideas.

By the same token, you should feel free to disagree, either verbally or in your written assignments, with any idea expressed in class, whether by me or by any student. Your grade will not be determined by how closely your thought agrees with mine; rather, it will be the product of the quality of both your thinking and your expression of that thinking. Every semester, I happily give "A" grades to students with whom I strongly disagree, because they write and speak with such clarity and grace.

**Penn State Sexual Harassment Policy AD-41:** Penn State is committed to an open, sensitive, understanding, and responsive campus environment, and as such, sexual harassment of faculty, staff, or students will not be tolerated. Penn State's sexual harassment policy is available in greater detail [online](#).

**Penn State Accommodations Policy:** It is Penn State's [policy](#) not to discriminate against qualified students with documented disabilities in its educational programs. If you have a disability-related need for modifications in this course, contact the Office for Disability Services at University Park (located in 116 Boucke Building) at 863-1807, preferably as early as possible, and please let me know as well.

## Schedule

Date	Reading Due
1.11 (T)	Disch from <i>The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of</i> ; Gibson - "The Gernsback Continuum"
1.13 (Th)	Suvin - "Estrangement and Cognition"; Russ - " <a href="#">When It Changed</a> "; Bisson - " <a href="#">They're Made Out of Meat</a> "
1.18	Asimov - "Runaround"; Bester - "Fondly Fahrenheit"
1.20	<i>Dollhouse</i> episode; Dick - "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale"
1.25	Dick - <i>Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep</i> p. 1-128
1.27	Dick - <i>Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep</i> p. 129-244
2.1	<b>film:</b> <a href="#">Moon</a> ; Bisson - " <a href="#">macs</a> "; Niven - "Jigsaw Man"
2.3	Morrison/Quitely - <i>We3</i>
2.8	<b>film:</b> <a href="#">Gattaca</a> ; McAuley - "Gene Wars"
2.10	Gibson - "Burning Chrome"; Stephenson - " <a href="#">Spew</a> "
2.15	Gibson - <i>Neuromancer</i> p. 1-135
2.17	Gibson - <i>Neuromancer</i> p. 137-271
2.22	Sladek - " <a href="#">The Happy Breed</a> "; Cadigan - "Rock On"
2.24	Butler - <i>Dawn</i> p. 5-112 (end of part II)
3.1	Butler - <i>Dawn</i> p. 116-248
3.3	<b>midterm</b>
3.8	<b>SPRING BREAK!</b>
3.10	
3.15	<i>Firefly</i> episode; <i>China Mountain Zhang</i> p. 1-128
3.17	McHugh - <i>China Mountain Zhang</i> p. 129-209
3.22	McHugh - <i>China Mountain Zhang</i> p. 210-313
3.24	Le Guin - "Nine Lives"; Delany - "Driftglass"
3.29	<b>film:</b> <a href="#">District 9</a> ; Stross - "MAXOS"; Pohl - "The Day After the Day After the Martians Came"
3.31	Du Bois - " <a href="#">The Comet</a> "; Bradbury - "Way in the Middle of the Air"
4.5	Haldeman - <i>The Forever War</i> p. 1-138
4.7	Haldeman - <i>The Forever War</i> p. 139-278
4.12	<a href="#">Portal</a>
4.14	Vaughan/Guerra - <i>Y: The Last Man</i> ; Tiptree - " <a href="#">The Screwfly Solution</a> "
4.19	<b>film:</b> <a href="#">Children of Men</a>
4.21	Stephenson - " <a href="#">The Great Simoleon Caper</a> "; Robinson - " <a href="#">Melancholy Elephants</a> "
4.26	Doctorow - <a href="#">Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom</a> p. 7-109
4.28	Doctorow - <a href="#">Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom</a> p. 110-206

Details about the **final exam** to be announced later.

All readings not already linked on the syllabus will be online at <http://noendofneon.net/scifi/readings>  
(the password to which will be given out in class)