
Dystopian Visions of America

History, Forms, and Themes of Speculative Fiction

The rise of fascism, consequences of socialism, global nuclear warfare, overpopulation, genetic engineering, climate change, and pandemic diseases – dystopian fiction projects a dark future for mankind. Distant settings and shocking scenarios serve to de-familiarize the dystopian world from the known world, thereby foregrounding and commenting on the social, political, and cultural conditions of the present. In this sense, many dystopias are cautionary tales that imagine possible futures on the basis of contemporary preoccupations and in response to utopian ideals and modern critical thought.

This seminar explores the concept of dystopia and traces its historical development in North America from the late-nineteenth century to today. We will first address a number of theoretical concerns and examine the cultural work dystopias perform. Then, we will study influential literary and cinematic dystopias in historical context, and analyze and discuss their forms and themes in class. Among the primary texts are novels by Sinclair Lewis, Margaret Atwood, and Cormac McCarthy as well as the *Terminator* film franchise. An entire workshop on May 13 will be dedicated to climate-fiction (for details see below).

Course Information

This course can be taken as part of the M.A. module B or C in the culture department.

Registration

To gain credit for this course, you need to have registered on Blackboard and in the Campus Management System. Please do so in advance of our first session. Attendance of the first session is mandatory to secure a spot in this class. If you cannot attend this session, please let me know in advance via email.

Course Requirements

Preparation of reading assignments, active participation in class discussions, oral presentation, term paper (20 pages).

Summer Term 2016
Wednesday, 2–4 p.m., room #201 (JFKI)

Dr. Kathleen Look
Kathleen.Look@fu-berlin.de
Office: room #123 (Fabeckstr. 15)
Office Hours: Wednesday, 4–5 p.m.

Reading

Participants need to purchase the following books (see below for details):

- Ayn Rand, *Anthem*
- Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*
- Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*
- Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*

Further required readings, along with a number of suggested texts, will be available on Blackboard and on the reserve shelf in the JFKI library.

Dates and Deadlines

13 May 2016
Cli-Fi Workshop

13 July 2016
Abstract due for term paper.

15 August 2016
Term paper due.



Course Organization

Course Type

Like all M.A.-level seminars, this course is intended to build upon the basic concepts and methods that you encountered and mastered in your undergraduate studies. Think of our course as a research group: all of us work together on an overall topic, but each participant will be asked to develop a specific aspect into a unique research project (i.e. the final paper).

I take your interest in the subject matter for granted and rely on you to pursue your reading and research independently outside of class. The readings on our syllabus are minimum requirements, which I expect you to have prepared before each week's session. "Prepared" is not synonymous with having read a text. To prepare assigned texts means to engage with them in depth, think about their structure/the main argument/the aesthetics, to look up unfamiliar words or concepts, and to take notes that will allow you to speak up in class.

Class meetings provide a forum for discussing your findings and thoughts with other students who have been studying related issues. Thus, communication will be a central aspect of our course. This involves everyone's willingness to offer and accept critique. Be prepared to relate your thoughts and results to other people's thoughts and results. Never doubt your ability to make a contribution. Posing questions in class or opening up a debate are valid forms of contributing as well. Speak up so that others can learn from you (as you learn from them).

Presentation

To receive credit in this class, you need to give an in-class presentation. These presentations will provide background information and enhance our understanding of the dystopias in their historical context. All participants need to sign up for one session (from sessions 4–11). The presentation topics range from key concepts and theories to historical events and intellectual debates. Material and secondary literature are listed in the syllabus below ("Suggested Reading"). Presentations will be held in a so-called fishbowl format. This means that students who have signed up for a session will engage with the secondary texts and material, select a passage from the dystopia, and prepare hypotheses or thoughts that serve as the springboard for a conversation between the presenters and for further discussion. The rest of the class will watch, listen, and take notes until the discussion expands to include the entire class.

Instructions for the presentation:

- Sign up for a session via e-mail by **May 11, 2016**. Name one alternative session.
- Read and prepare the secondary literature/material for your session.
- Condense the main arguments so that you can present them in class.
- Relate the secondary text/material to the dystopia: What are connections? How can it enhance our understanding of the primary text? Does the dystopia directly address this topic?
- Choose a short passage (max. one page) from the dystopia that best illustrates the points you have uncovered.
- Prepare a close reading of that passage, which you present in class.
- Come up with a thesis or hypothesis that you can discuss with your fellow presenters and the rest of the class.

Term Paper

You should not postpone your thinking and research on your term paper to the end of the semester, but start exploring several options as early as possible. Once you have (1) decided which primary material will form the basis of your project, (2) gained a good sense of the method you will follow to survey and analyze this material, and (3) found secondary literature you find relevant or instructive, (4) try to come up with a working thesis (alternatively: a set of specific research questions) and a tentative outline for your paper. Condense these first ideas about your project in an abstract (max. 300 words) and submit it by **July 13, 2016**.

Requirements for the term paper:

- Thesis statement, in-depth analysis, intelligent structure, academic language and style.
- Approx. 20 pages (including works cited), 1.5 line spacing, font size 12.
- Use MLA style for all other matters of formatting, citation, and documentation (consult the MLA Handbook, 7th ed.).
- Submit by **August 15, 2016** (no late papers).

Absence Policy

Regular attendance is required. You may not miss more than two classes. If you have to miss a class, please excuse yourself in advance (if possible). If you decide to drop this course, please do not just stay away, but tell me.

A Note on Plagiarism

You need to cite all the sources you use for the term paper. If you make use of somebody else's ideas and words without citing the source you commit plagiarism. If you plagiarize you will not only fail the course but endanger your entire career as a student at this university. To find out more about plagiarism and its consequences, see the special section on our website:

<http://www.jfki.fu-berlin.de/en/academics/Plagiarism/index.html>

Selected Bibliography

Note: This "Selected Bibliography" provides the bibliographical information for all the texts that you find on the syllabus. Hence, the list is just a starting point for your own research. If you want to find out more, have a look at the reserve shelf (Handapparat 15) in the JFKI library and continue from there.

Dystopian Literature

*Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. 1985. London: Vintage, 2010.

*Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. 1953. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013.

Donnelly, Ignatius. *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century*. 1890. Ed. Walter B. Rideout. Cambridge, MA: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1960. [excerpts]

Lewis, Sinclair. *It Can't Happen Here*. 1935. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1936. [excerpts]

*McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Knopf, 2006.

*Rand, Ayn. *Anthem*. 1938. New York: Signet, 1995.

* = purchase of this edition required

Dystopian Films

Terminator Film Franchise:

- The Terminator*. Dir. James Cameron. Perf. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Michael Biehn, Linda Hamilton. 1984. MGM Home Entertainment, 2003. DVD.
- Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. Dir. James Cameron. Per. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Linda Hamilton, Robert Patrick, Edward Furlong. 1991. Momentum Pictures, 2001. DVD.
- Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*. Dir. Jonathan Mostow. Perf. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Nick Stahl, Claire Danes. 2003. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2009.
- Terminator Salvation*. Dir. McG. Perf. Christian Bale, Sam Worthington. 2009. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2009. DVD.
- Terminator Genisys*. Dir. Alan Taylor. Perf. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Emilia Clarke, Matt Smith. 2015. Skydance Productions, 2015. DVD.

Cli-Fi Films:

- The Day after Tomorrow*. Dir. Roland Emmerich. Perf. Dennis Quaid, Jake Gyllenhaal, Ian Holm. 2004. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2004. DVD.
- Take Shelter*. Dir. Jeff Nichols. Perf. Michael Shannon, Jessica Chastain. 2011. Ascot Elite Home Entertainment, 2012. DVD.
- Snowpiercer*. Dir. Bong Joon Ho. Perf. Chris Evans, Tilda Swinton. 2013. Ascot Elite Home Entertainment, 2014. DVD.
- Interstellar*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Matthew McConaughey, Anne Hathaway, Jessica Chastain, Michael Caine. 2014. Warner Home Video Germany, 2015. DVD.
- Mad Max: Fury Road*. Dir. George Miller. Perf. Tom Hardy, Charlize Theron. 2015. Warner Brothers, 2015. DVD.

Secondary Literature and Material

- Axelrad, Allan M. "Ideology and Utopia in the Works of Ignatius Donnelly." *American Studies* 12.2 (Fall 1971): 47–65.
- Beauchamp, Gorman. "The Politics of *The Handmaid's Tale*." *The Midwest Quarterly* 51.1 (Autumn 2009): 11–25.
- Bernstein, Andrew. "Anthem and Collectivist Regression into Primitivism." *Essays on Ayn Rand's Anthem*. Ed. Robert Mayhew. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005. 299–305.
- Biressi, Anita and Heather Nunn. "Selfishness in Austerity Times: What Role Does the Term Selfishness Play in Current Political Battles?" *Soundings* 56 (Winter 2013): 54–66.
- Booker, M. Keith. "Introduction: Utopia, Dystopia, and Social Critique." *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*. Westport, CO: Greenwood P, 1994. 1–23.
- Brier, Evan. "The 'Incalculable Value of Reading': *Fahrenheit 451* and the Paperback Assault on Mass Culture." *A Novel Marketplace: Mass Culture, the Book Trade, and Postwar American Fiction*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2011. 45–73.
- Byers, Thomas. "Terminating the Postmodern: Masculinity and Pomophobia." *Modern Fiction Studies* 41.1 (Spring 1995): 5–33.
- Cavalcanti, Ildney. "Utopias of/f Language in Contemporary Feminist Literary Dystopias." *Utopian Studies: Journal of the Society for Utopian Studies* 11.2 (2000): 152–80.
- Engerman, David C. "Radical Alternatives." *Encyclopedia of American Cultural & Intellectual History*. Ed. Mary Kupiec Cayton. Vol. 1. New York: Scribner, 2001. 689–701.
- Evancie, Angela. "So Hot Right Now: Has Climate Change Created a New Literary Genre?" *NPR Books*. NPR, 20 Apr. 2013. Web. 3 March 2016.

- Evans, Sara M. "Second-Wave Feminism." *Encyclopedia of American Cultural & Intellectual History*. Ed. Mary Kupiec Cayton. Vol. 2. New York: Scribner, 2001. 161–71.
- Feuer, Lois. "The Calculus of Love and Nightmare: *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 38.2 (1997): 83–95.
- Heinze, Rüdiger. "Anti-Humanist Dystopia: Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953)." *Dystopia, Science Fiction, Post-Apocalypse: Classics – New Tendencies – Model Interpretations*. Ed. Eckart Voigts and Alessandra Boller. Trier: WVT, 2015. 67–84.
- Hofstadter, Richard. *The Age of Reform*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955.
- Hogsette, David S. "Margaret Atwood's Rhetorical Epilogue in *The Handmaid's Tale*: The Reader's Role in Empowering Offred's Speech Act." *Critique* 38.4 (Summer 1997): 262–78.
- Ketterer, David. "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: A Contextual Dystopia." *Science Fiction Studies* 16.2 (July 1989): 209–17.
- Knoenagel, Axel. "The Historical Context of Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*." *Southern Humanities Review* 29 (1995): 221–36.
- Kunkel, Benjamin. "Dystopia and the End of Politics." *Dissent* 55.4 (Fall 2008): 89–98.
- Kunsa, Ashley. "'Maps of the World in Its Becoming': Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 33.1 (Fall 2009): 57–74.
- Machan, Tibor R. "Ayn Rand versus Karl Marx." *International Journal of Social Economics* 21.2/3/4 (1994): 54–67.
- McClay, Wilfried "Individualism and the Self." *Encyclopedia of American Cultural & Intellectual History*. Ed. Mary Kupiec Cayton. Vol. 3. New York: Scribner, 2001. 63–71.
- Neuman, Shirley C. "'Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid's Tale*." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 75.3 (2006): 857–68.
- Rambo, Shelly L. "Beyond Redemption? Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* after the End of the World." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 41.2 (Fall 2008): 99–120.
- Samuel, Alexandra. "How to Find Hope in Dystopian Fiction." *JSTOR Daily*. Ithaka, 23 Feb. 2016. Web. 4 Mar. 2016.
- Saxton, Alexander. "*Caesar's Column*: The Dialogue of Utopia and Catastrophe." *American Quarterly* 19.2 (Summer 1967): 224–38.
- Seed, David. "The Flight from the Good Life: *Fahrenheit 451* in the Context of Postwar American Dystopias." *Journal of American Studies* 28.2 (Aug. 1994): 225–40.
- Sisk, David W. "The Language of Dystopia." *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias*. Westport, CO: Greenwood P, 1997. 1–15.
- Stableford, Brian. "Ecology and Dystopia." *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*. Ed. Gregory Claeys. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. 259–81.
- Stein, Karen F. "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Scheherazade in Dystopia." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 61.2 (Winter 1991): 269–79.
- Sobchack, Vivian. "American Science Fiction: An Overview." *A Companion to Science Fiction*. Ed. David Seed. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. 261–74.
- Telotte, J.P. "*The Terminator*, *Terminator 2*, and the Exposed Body." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 20.2 (Summer 1992): 26–34.
- Ullrich, J.K. "From Margaret Atwood to Paolo Bacigalupi: The New Popularity of 'Climate Fiction.'" *Atlantic* 14 Aug. 2015. Web. 3 March 2016.
- Roemer, Kenneth M. "Paradise Transformed: Varieties of Nineteenth-Century Utopias." *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*. Ed. Gregory Claeys. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. 79–106.
- "Will Fascism Come to America?" *The Modern Monthly* (Sept. 1934): 453–78, 492.
- "Will Fiction Influence How We React to Climate Change?" Room for Debate Blog. *New York Times* 29 July 2015. Web. 3 March 2016.
- Wegner, Phillip E. "Utopia." *A Companion to Science Fiction*. Ed. David Seed. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. 79–94.

Syllabus

April 20 Session 1: Course Introduction and Organizational Matters

Reading:

Samuel, "How to Find Hope in Dystopian Fiction" (2016) [distributed in class]

April 27 Session 2: Utopia and Dystopia

Reading:

Kenneth M. Roemer, "Paradise Transformed" (2010)

Phillip E. Wegner, "Utopia" (2005)

David W. Sisk, "The Language of Dystopia" (1997)

May 4 Session 3: Dystopian Thought and Cultural Criticism

Reading:

M. Keith Booker, "Introduction: Utopia, Dystopia, and Social Critique" (1994)

May 11 --- no class ---

[last day to sign up for presentations]

May 13 **Workshop: "Cli-Fi: The Dystopian Impulse of Contemporary Climate-Fiction"**

Since the new millennium, a growing canon of dystopian literature and film centers around climate change, natural disasters, and environmental catastrophes. These texts have been labeled "climate change fiction," "climate-fiction," or short "cli-fi." Notable examples of North American cli-fi are the novels of Barbara Kingsolver, Paolo Bacigalupi, Margaret Atwood, Nathaniel Rich and others, as well as Hollywood films such as *The Day after Tomorrow*, *Interstellar*, and *Mad Max: Fury Road*. Students from the M.A. seminars "Dystopian Visions of America" (Kathleen Lock) and "American Ecologies" (Alexander Starre) will meet for this workshop to critically engage with the aesthetics and the cultural work of cli-fi.

As guest lecturer and discussant, we have invited Julia Leyda, an American Studies scholar and cli-fi expert who has worked on media representations of extreme weather and climate change, most recently in her co-edited collection *Extreme Weather and Global Media* (Routledge, 2015). During the first part of the workshop, Julia Leyda will introduce the group to cli-fi and provide impulses from cultural theory to jump-start our discussion. Based on selections from recent media coverage, we will then discuss the genres potential for critical intervention in contemporary political debates. In the second part of the workshop, we will direct our attention to the analysis and discussion of five recent cli-fi films (see list below). All students need to sign up for one of the films and prepare a clip to present in class. Each presentation needs to include both a formal analysis and a short interpretation (close reading) of the scene in question. Presenters are also responsible for moderating a short discussion with the group.

Films and Required Reading

Films:

The Day after Tomorrow (Roland Emmerich, 2004)

Take Shelter (Jeff Nichols, 2011)

Snowpiercer (Bong Joon Ho, 2013)

Interstellar (Christopher Nolan, 2014)

Mad Max: Fury Road (George Miller, 2015)

Background Reading:

Brian Stableford, "Ecology and Dystopia" (2010)

Media Debate on Cli-Fi:

J.K. Ullrich, "From Margaret Atwood to Paolo Bacigalupi: The New Popularity of 'Climate Fiction'" (2015)

"Will Fiction Influence How We React to Climate Change?" (2015)

Angela Evancie, "So Hot Right Now: Has Climate Change Created a New Literary Genre?" (2013) [radio feature]

May 18 Session 4: Capitalism, Class Struggle and Urban Nightmares

Reading:

Ignatius Donnelly, *Caesar's Column* (1890) – ch. 1–4, 11–16, 18–21, 30–40

Suggested Reading:

Richard Hofstadter, "The Folklore of Populism" from *The Age of Reform* (1955)

Alexander Saxton, "*Caesar's Column: The Dialogue of Utopia and Catastrophe*" (1967)

Allan M. Axelrad, "Ideology and Utopia in the Works of Ignatius Donnelly" (1971)

May 25 Session 5: Fascism and the Fragility of Democracy

Reading:

Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here* (1935) – ch. 1–4, 7–9, 11–12, 15–18, 20, 22, 26, 30–31, 35–37

Suggested Reading:

David C. Engerman, "Radical Alternatives" (2001)

Axel Knoenagel, "The Historical Context of Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*" (1995)

"Will Fascism Come to America? (A Symposium)" (1934)

June 1 Session 6: Individualism and the Problem of Equality

Reading:

Ayn Rand, *Anthem* (1938)

Suggested Reading:

Andrew Bernstein, "*Anthem* and Collectivist Regression into Primitivism" (2005)

Tibor R. Machan, "Ayn Rand versus Karl Marx" (1994)

Wilfried McClay, "Individualism and the Self" (2001)

Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, "Selfishness in Austerity Times: What Role Does the Term Selfishness Play in Current Political Battles?" (2013)

June 8 Session 7: Dystopian Outlooks on Mass Culture

Reading:

Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953)

Suggested Reading:

Rüdiger Heinze, "Anti-Humanist Dystopia: Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953)" (2015)

David Seed, "The Flight from the Good Life: *Fahrenheit 451* in the Context of Postwar American Dystopias" (1994)

Brier, Evan. "The 'Incalculable Value of Reading': *Fahrenheit 451* and the Paperback Assault on Mass Culture" (2011)

- June 15 Session 8: Feminism and the Dystopian Tradition
- Reading:
Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)
- Suggested Reading:
Sara M. Evans, "Second-Wave Feminism" (2001)
Shirley C. Neuman, "'Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid's Tale*" (2006)
Gorman Beauchamp, "The Politics of *The Handmaid's Tale*" (2009)
- June 22 --- no class ---
[Seriality Conference, 22–24 June <http://www.popularseriality.de/en/konferenz/index.html>]
- June 29 Session 9: Feminism and the Dystopian Tradition (cont.)
- Reading:
Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)
- Suggested Reading:
David S. Hogsette, "Margaret Atwood's Rhetorical Epilogue in *The Handmaid's Tale*" (1991)
Karen F. Stein, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Scheherazade in Dystopia" (1991)
Ildney Cavalcanti, "Utopias of/f Language in Contemporary Feminist Literary Dystopias" (2000)
- July 6 Session 10: Techno-Dystopia
- Film:
Terminator 2: Judgment Day (James Cameron, 1991)
- Suggested Reading:
Vivian Sobchack, "American Science Fiction Film: An Overview" (2005)
J.P. Telotte, "*The Terminator, Terminator 2, and the Exposed Body*" (1992)
Thomas Byers, "Terminating the Postmodern: Masculinity and Pomophobia" (1995)
- July 13 Session 11: Post-Apocalyptic Fiction
- Reading:
Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2006)
- Suggested Reading:
Benjamin Kunkel, "Dystopia and the End of Politics" (2008)
Shelly L. Rambo, "Beyond Redemption? Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* after the End of the World" (2008)
Ashley Kunsu, "'Maps of the World in Its Becoming': Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*" (2009)
[abstract for term paper due]
- July 20 Session 12: Concluding Discussion and "Class Picks"