A Wider Realism: The Theory and Practice of Speculative Writing
Instructor: Christopher Cokinos

In her recent acceptance speech at the National Book Awards, Ursula K. Le Guin spoke of “the realists of a larger reality.” She was speaking of a wider realism, of what we might also call speculative writing or speculative fiction. H.G. Wells called it scientific romance. Pulp magazine editor Hugo Gernsback—the man most responsible for ghettoizing the genre—called it scientification. (And his own writing was just as awful as that term might suggest). Many just call it SF. Only the naïve call it sci-fi. The contemporary British writer Brian Aldiss prefers the term metaphorical realism. These names matter, as do genre definitions (even as we might undo them) because these are ways of mapping writerly and readerly horizons of expectations (even as we might complicate them).

This is a multi-genre course in the theory and practice of speculative writing. I teach my craft courses more akin to readings classes—closer to literature seminars—even as I want technique to be foregrounded in discussion and in product for the MFA students. And this is in some ways a pedagogically impossible class: Chances are, you are coming to “science fiction” without a historical and theoretical context for this capacious and contentious genre. So I will try to provide that to the extent possible. At the same time, we will be working on responses to the work that push your craft. History, theory, craft. That’s a lot. A genre whose roots begin, some say, in ancient tales or, at least, fantastical travel narratives. Or that begins with Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. Or with Verne and H.G. Wells. Or...

It’s a complicated story. As we grapple with historicizing the genre, we are necessarily grappling with how to understand what its readers have traditionally valued: premise (or novum); world-building; sense of wonder or varieties of the sublime and grotesque; scientific accuracy or, at least, logical extrapolation; and what critic Darko Suvin calls “cognitive estrangement.” This is in contrast to mainstream realism’s focus on, say, characterization/psychological complexity and verisimilitude.

In this course we will focus on what I call a unitary reading experience that unites as best as possible the values of these two genres. This is work that Orson Scott Card has called—and it’s not a compliment—“li fi.” The reading list will include Le Guin, Samuel Delaney, J.G. Ballard, Margaret Atwood and other writers you probably don’t know, such as Pamela Zoline, Carol Emshwiller and Brian Aldiss. We’ll read at least one book of poetry—Swedish Nobel Laureate Harry Martinson’s space epic Ariana—and a selection of nonfiction writing that
engages with varieties of the future, including the dark essayistic speculations of Loren Eiseley and the crisp, engaging journalism of Joel Garreau.

Throughout, we will be reading criticism and theory to contextualize the genre and its complications—and reading in such a way that, I trust, your own work in the field becomes enriched intellectually and creatively.

Your own work? Among other things, you’ll be asked to produce several microfictions taking on the points-of-view of characters or objects in the stories that we read. You will also write either a suite of poems that explore technology, time and the body or an essay/article about the same. You will do some kind of critical assignment, to be determined. Doctoral students, who are welcome to take the course, will produce a major seminar paper. All this work must be produced with an eye toward presentation and publication. The writing assignments are not set in stone yet so I’m looking forward to talking with students to produce writing assignments that are most generative and beneficial to you.

Political Fictions

Instructor: Manuel Muñoz

What do we mean when we call fiction “political”? What are such works subjecting to scrutiny (and how are the works themselves, conversely, under scrutiny)? Do we negate the relevance and utility of such work if we claim that all fiction is “political”? What is the risk in producing work that openly obliges us to engage with “political” questions? In what ways might our chosen subjects explore complex ethical questions about power and representation? A thematic course, our reading list will consider works that make explicit their mission to restore historical absences (Karen Tei Yamashita’s I Hotel, Helena María Viramontes’s Their Dogs Came with Them), to wrestle with shifting contemporary ideas of identity (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Americanah), or to offer perspectives on how desire is negotiated (Elfríða Jórisdóttir’s The Piano Teacher). A short critical essay will be required, as well as some creative work that engages these questions.
Writing Through (Public) Feelings
Instructor: Susan Briante

The lyric legacy is stitched through with debates about the relationship between poetry and emotion: from Wordsworth’s proclamation that poetry is “a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” to a recent AWP panel on sentiment “Hot/Not.” We will pick up those debates by looking at the work of a group of scholars who study the use of emotion in literature in the same way others have traced power relations in order to expose and reveal contemporary dynamics around class, race, gender, and national identity. Working under a concept of Public Feelings, these theorists suggest that feelings can be both public as well as private, political as well as personal. In this seminar, we will study the work of a diverse group of writers and thinkers including Anne Carson, Anne Boyer, Claudia Rankine, Fred Moten, CD Wright, Ann Cvetkovich, and Lauren Berlant, among others, whose work explores expressions of loss, love, nostalgia, trauma, patriotism, precarity, depression and optimism. While the questions we raise and issues we discuss will be rooted in poetry, our findings will be relevant to those writing in and beyond a variety of genres. Through readings, discussions, critical/creative assignments, and reflections, we will consider: How do we approach issues of sentimentality and sincerity? What if anything do feelings measure? What are the differences between public and private feelings?

Reading List:
Joy Katz, “Symposium on Sentiment” (from Pleiades 32:1 2012)

Loss
Anne Carson Nox
Nick Flynn My Feelings
Brenda Hillman Death Tractates
Jeffrey Pethybridge Striven
Eleni Sikelianos The Book of Jon
Trauma/Violence
Julie Carr Rag or 100 Notes on Violence
Kate Greenstreet Young Tambling
M. NourbeSe Philip, Zong!
Eleni Sikelianos You Animal Machine

Love Stories
Carmen Giménez Smith Bring Down the Little Birds
Maggie Nelson The Argonauts
Montana Rays, (guns & butter)
CD Wright, Tremble
Rachel Zucker, MOTHER(s)

Communities of Feeling
Anne Boyer Garments Against Women
I am the Beggar of the World: Landays from Contemporary Afghanistan
Bhanu Kapil Schizophrenic
Fred Moten Little Edges or The Feel Trio
Claudia Rankine Citizen
Craig Santos Perez from Unincorporated Territories [guma]
Juliana Spahr, That Winter the Wolf Came