

FUTURE LIVES

Brown University // Fall 2014

M 1-4 & Th 7-9 // Granoff Center, Englander Studio

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www.future-lives.com

OVERVIEW

This is a production course in working beyond the cutting edge. Drawing from science fiction and speculative practices in various media, we explore how myth and technology have shaped current worldviews and respond with projects of our own—making (and faking) new myths and technologies that might shape future lives. Musical robots, network interplays, digital gardens, living rooms, automated companies, virtual pop stars, performance protests, and time bending cartoons are all potential starting places. Significant production experience in at least one medium is required.

UNDERVIEW

The word 'lives' in Future Lives has a double meaning. Live means both to live or be alive (life) and to be live as in performing live (here and now). Science fiction is adept at exploring the intersections and overlap between these modes of liveness, combining the technological perspective (A.I., virtual life, augmented life) and the cultural / media studies perspective (liveness, performance, mediation). Here, we use science fiction to navigate the space between these two lives—exploring how new technologies continue to (re)frame what it means to be and perform (a)live.

Science fiction and other speculative practices (design fiction, futurism) look past the 'cutting edge' or 'the state of the art', important today because new technologies are developed so quickly. The companies at the cutting edge of technological development produce new modes of engagement and, in engaging with them, we are recreated in their vision. Humans make technologies make humans. What space is there for meaningful intervention into 'new' media when being and making at the cutting edge is a game of perpetual catch up?

Speculation proposes alternative tactics—guises, characters, masks, stories, and myths that help you to step outside of the present to imagine another world. This course examines the utility and aesthetics of speculation. What possibilities emerge when one works as someone/thing else? How does new technology change how we perform, how we perceive ourselves, and how we live? How might we leapfrog the cutting edge to explore alternate futures, produce radically new types of technologies, and provide different perspectives on future lives?

OBJECTIVES

1. Navigate the history of speculative practices in literature, film, music, and new media.
2. Identify themes, methods, and concepts common in speculating about future lives.
3. Develop both critical and constructive perspectives on the relationship between technology and life.
4. Produce original work and/or adapt existing fictions to offer new perspectives on the future of life.

EVALUATION

ATTENDANCE & PARTICIPATION: 20 %

Attendance and participation are mandatory. Unexcused absences beyond three will result in the deduction of a letter grade. Participation includes both in-class discussion and online or asynchronous discussion. You are expected to engage with all assigned materials prior to class and prepare questions or thoughts for discussion.

EXERCISES: 30 %

Short exercises will be due most weeks. They vary in scope, but as a general rule, they should take an evening of work (between 2 and 6 hours). Be ready to present exercises in class on the date they are listed in the syllabus.

NOTEBOOK: 10 %

Buy a notebook for recording your thoughts about the materials along with any figures, sketches, and ideas you might want to include and bring it to class each week. Notebooks are due at the end of the term along with a short (1 to 2 page) synopsis mapping the notebook's contents / evolution.

FINAL PROJECT: 40 %

10.27 // CONCEPT DUE 10 % // Brief Presentation in class
11.17 // TRAILER DUE 10 % // Brief Screening in class (< 3 minutes)
12.04 // PROJECT DUE 20 %

The form of the final project is open, but it should relate in some way to the themes of the course. Final projects should be significant in scope, but do not necessarily need to be singular works. They can be a series of iterations, a sustained practice, an institution, etc.

Final projects will be presented for the public on December 11th. Mark your calendars.

MATERIALS

Set aside a few hours to engage with each week's materials, which draw from film, music, literature, new media, advertising, journalism and online forms. Occasionally, short theoretical readings are assigned to provide context or perspective. Most of the materials are available on the course website—future-lives.com. You are responsible for checking the website and viewing all materials posted by Friday at 5pm for the following Monday's class. If something resonates with you, follow the rabbit hole—learn about the artist's inspirations, the production process, etc. Treat the materials as you might treat a text, view them from different angles, think about them while you are walking around.

There are a few required books:

Neuromancer by William Gibson and/or *Red Spiders White Webs* by Misha
Snow Crash and/or *Diamond Age*, both by Neal Stephenson
Einstein Intersection by Samuel Delany
Bloodchild by Octavia Butler
Stories of Your Life and Others by Ted Chiang
The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction
Frankenstein by Mary Shelley (Recommended if you have not already read it)

As part of our exploration of virtual lives, you will be required to join a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. I will provide a list, but you are free to choose a game/situation not on the list, just run it by me first.

POLICIES

Please speak with me during office hours if you have a disability or other condition that might require modification of the course procedures or exercises. For information visit <http://www.brown.edu/campus-life/support/accessibility-services>

I expect you to follow the Brown Academic Code. Production courses sometimes call into question traditional notions of fair use, copyright, and plagiarism. If you have questions about a specific project, meet with me during office hours.

I will usually reply to emails within 24 hours. If I don't reply within 24 hours, email me again.

This syllabus and schedule will change as we move through the course.

INTRODUCTION

- 09.08** Overview, policies, requirements, and course structure. Enrollment logistics and questionnaire. Why science/speculative fiction? Why “Future Lives”?
- 09.10** // email answers to questionnaires to Peter and David by noon
- 09.11** Introductory screenings & discussion

A HISTORY OF FUTURE LIVES

Technological progress has merely provided us with more efficient means for going backwards.

~ Aldous Huxley

09.15 IN THE BEGINNING...

Discussion materials:

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley (1818) – recommended // novel
e Voyage dans la Lune (A Trip to the Moon) by Georges Méliès (1902) // film
Metropolis by Fritz Lang (1929) // film
The Lottery by Shirley Jackson (1948) // short story
The Star by Arthur C. Clarke (1955) // short story

equipment, production management, & granoff policies

introduction to design fiction & speculative art

EXERCISE 1: Briefly describe 5 different futures in which life as we know it is drastically altered. A paragraph for each future is fine. Feel free to explore both possible and impossible futures. Utopias, dystopias, parallel, absurd, scientifically precise, irrational, mystical, critical, subtle, epic, etc.

09.18 SCREENING: 2001: A Space Odyssey // *Stalker* by Tarkovsky // *Alphaville* by Goddard // *Frankenstein*

09.22 THE NEXT GENERATION...

Discussion materials:

Jodorowsky's Dune by Frank Pavich (2013) - Film
When It Changed by Joanna Russ (1972) – Short Story
The Word for World is Forest by Ursula K. Le Guin (1978) – Short Story
Aye, and Gomorrah... by Samuel Delany – Short Story

EXERCISE 2: Translate one of your future scenarios into another (non linguistic or differently linguistic) medium. ‘Faking’ is acceptable, probably even necessary. The goal is to explore the speculative possibilities of a medium you are comfortable working within.

VIRTUAL LIVES

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation.

William Gibson, *Neuromancer*

09.25 OCVLUS RIFT WORKSHOP

09.29 AVATARS // CYBERSPACE

Discussion materials:

Burning Chrome by William Gibson (1941) – short story

Neuromancer by William Gibson (1984) or *Red Spider White Web* (1999) by Misha - novels

Pretty Boy Crossover by Pat Cadigan (1986) – short story

EXERCISE 3: Research and join a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) that you will play with/in for the next 3 weeks (until 10/20). I will give you a list of games to think about, but feel free to propose a game/virtual community/networked social situation not on the list. Prepare a short presentation that includes reasons for choosing your game, character selection, and any tactics or methods you are planning to employ.

10.02 SCREENING: eXistenZ (1999)

10.06 LIVING IN A CAVE

Tour of the CAVE (Computer Assisted Virtual Environment) with John Cayley.

Discussion materials:

The Allegory of the Cave by Plato (recommended) – excerpt

Einstein Intersection by Samuel Delany - novel

Expressing the CAVES by Joe Dumit – short article

10.09 CONVERSATION WITH CHRIS NOVELLO

10.13 NO CLASS

10.16 VIRTUAL PERFORMANCE

EXERCISE 4: Create documentation of/about/around your virtual life in a time-based medium—no more than 5 minutes long. The content, style, and complexity is entirely up to you. Film, machinima, audio, comic, play, reading, game are all acceptable outputs.

AUGMENTED LIVES

It's the real world—only better (Qualcomm)

Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert. (Haraway)

10.20

CYBORGS

Conversation with Sophia Brueckner “Science Fiction to Science Fabrication”

Discussion materials:

Ghost in the Shell (1995) - film

either *Snow Crash* or *Diamond Age* both by Neal Stephenson (1995) - novels

readings on augmented reality – journalistic articles

MIT Media Lab - website

“Cyborgs at Large” an interview with Donna Haraway (recommended)

10.23

SCREENING: *Pumzi* (2010) by Wanuri Kahiu & *They Live* (1988) by John Carpenter

10.27

SILICON VALLEY PREDICTS...

// final project proposals due

Discussion materials:

Understand (1991) by Ted Chiang – short story

Recent advertising & marketing by Google (Glass, cars, etc), Microsoft (Future Visions), & others

Solar Roads, BrainGate, & the cutting edge

Speculative new media – artist webpages

Frederik Pohl and Cyril M. Kornbluth, *The Space Merchants* - novel

10.30

SCREENING: Music/videos by Sun Ra, P-Funk, David Bowie, Daft Punk, Janelle Monáe

11.03

IMAGES OF THE FUTURE

Discussion materials:

the images of Rammellzee, Moebius, Wangechi Mutu

EXERCISE 5: Group project. Create a collective or institution that does not exist. Present it virtually on the internet, theatrically as a play, as a public installation, etc. It does not need to be epic but it must, in some way, interface with the world at large. Think about where your skill sets intersect and diverge.

ARTIFICIAL LIVES

I'm sorry Dave. I'm afraid I can't do that. (HAL)

The Sublimely Affective "Effect": The alien spaceship not as wonderfully functional, but as functionally wonderful—a merry-go-round of light, color, and music. (Vivian Sobchack)

11.06 **SCREENING:** *Bladerunner* (1982) by Ridley Scott (or something else, if everyone has seen BR)

materials:

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep by Phillip K Dick (1968) – short story

11.10 **ROBOTS // ANDROIDS**

Visit and Conversation with BrainGate researchers

Discussion materials:

Reason by Isaac Asimov (1941) – short story

Nine Lives by Ursula K Le Guin (1969) – short story

Exhalation by Ted Chiang (2008) – short story

The kinetic sculptures of Arthur Ganson – sculpture

11.13 **SCREENING:** *Moon* (2009) by Duncan Jones

11.17 **NETWORKED INTELLIGENCE // FUTURE LIFE**

watch final project trailers

Discussion materials:

Mass Effect 2 - video game

Siri and other network enabled software

The Last Question by Isaac Asimov – short story

"I, Borg" *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1992) – tv episode

Story of Your Life (1999) by Ted Chiang – short story

The Lifecycle of Software Objects (2010) by Ted Chiang – short story

PARELLEL / ALTERNATIVE LIVES

Science fiction isn't just thinking about the world out there. It's also thinking about how that world might be—a particularly important exercise for those who are oppressed, because if they're going to change the world we live in, they—and all of us—have to be able to think about a world that works differently. (Delany)

11.20 **SCREENING:** The Holy Mountain by Alejandro Jodorowsky or Alien (1979) by Ridley Scott

11.24 **CONVERSATION:** Hunter Hargraves on “Communality and Queer Futurism”

Bloodchild and Other Stories (1980s) by Octavia Butler – collection of stories

Readings by Terence McKenna – collection of interviews and lectures

Altered States (1980) by Paddy Chayefsky - film

11.27 **NO CLASSES**

12.01 **WORK-IN-PROGRESS CRITIQUES**

12.?? **FINAL PROJECT PRESENTATIONS**