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# Science Fiction (LIT 370): Alien Worlds

Autumn 2017

Rob Browning

M,W,F 2:00-2:50

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Office hours (LA 217): MWF 12:10-1:50 and by appointment

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**“The alien is the creation of a need—man’s need to designate something that is genuinely outside himself, something that is truly nonman, that has no initial relation to man except for the fact that it has no relation.”**

--from Slusser and Rabkin, “Introduction: The Anthropology of the Alien”

**“...the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose.”**

--J.B.S. Haldane

**“How do you expect to communicate with the ocean, when you can’t even understand one another?”**

--from *Solaris*, by Stanislaw Lem

This course focuses on science fiction about non-terrestrial worlds, the alien beings that populate these worlds, and the question of what such imaginative constructions might have to do with the planet Earth and our lives as human beings. We shall begin by surveying the early modern history of ideas about extraterrestrial worlds and life, after which we’ll be in position to study three of the most influential authors on these subjects: Olaf Stapledon, H.P. Lovecraft, and Stanislaw Lem. Where Stapledon extends the category of the “human” to some of the most alien life forms one can imagine and Lovecraft creates his aliens out of all-too-familiar fears of racial otherness, Lem would have us understand that the truly alien must remain utterly unknowable. These three authors will function as our conceptual launch pads, from which we’ll explore a variety of ways SF uses alien otherness to challenge us to think more critically about how we understand human nature and our racial, ethnic, sexual, linguistic, and economic identities under this umbrella. We’ll also reflect on the human need to imagine beyond what’s known and to disturb familiar categories—what Gregory Benford calls “effing the ineffable.”

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## **Required Texts:**

H.P. Lovecraft, *The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Stories* (Penguin, 2001). ISBN: 978-0-14-218003-7

Olaf Stapledon, *Star Maker* (Dover, 2008). ISBN: 978-0486466835

Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris* (Harvest, 1987). ISBN: 978-0-15-602760-1

James Tiptree, Jr., *Her Smoke Rose Up Forever* (Tachyon, 2004). ISBN: 1-892391-20-1

China Miéville, *Embassytown* (Ballantine, 2011). ISBN: 978-0-345-52450-8

**Recommended:** *The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction*, eds. Arthur B. Evans et al. (Wesleyan UP, 2010). ISBN: 978-0-8195-6955-4

## **Graded Work:**

Five response papers -----	40
First formal essay -----	20
Term paper -----	30
Participation -----	10

**Attendance** is an indication of your commitment to your studies. I'll become concerned if you miss more than three classes, and expect anyone in this position to see me so we may discuss your status in the class. Ordinarily (and certainly if I hear nothing from you), each absence beyond four will reduce the final grade by one-third of a letter grade.

**Please arrive to class on time.** While I understand that the most conscientious of us sometimes are delayed by circumstances beyond our control (and in those cases, please do come to class rather than not at all), persistent late arrivals are a distraction and unacceptable. You may dismiss yourself during class time, but—please—only if you have an urgent reason to do so.

**Participation:** My sense of your level of participation is based on your attendance, how well you appear to be keeping up with reading assignments (based on quizzes and your involvement in discussions), your contributions to class discussions, and any discussions you and I have during office hours. Outstanding participation will raise a final grade by one-third of a letter grade; poor participation due to poor preparation will lower a final grade by one-third of a letter grade.

**Essays:**

**1) Response papers.** These are informal, one page, single-spaced explorations of some aspect of a text we have read recently. A total of five are required – one for each of the five required texts (you may, if you like, substitute a work of short fiction or a film for two of these five texts). Each is due one class meeting after we have finished the work you're discussing. You should use these papers to help you think through your own interpretations of the texts and as forums for generating interesting questions and topics you might pursue in either of your two formal papers. Otherwise, you have considerable freedom in how you go about these papers.

**2) First formal essay.** An essay of five or more double-spaced pages on a topic relevant to our readings that interests you. Secondary sources are not required, but I encourage to use ones that can help you develop your thinking about the topic. To earn a grade of "C" or higher, your essay must have a strong, clearly stated thesis—which is to say, a focused claim and the main reason why you think it is valid. A strong thesis is not self-evident; it will require the work of your full essay to demonstrate and support convincingly.

**3) Term paper.** An essay of no fewer than ten double-spaced pages in which you engage with your chosen primary text(s) and carefully selected critical/theoretical publications. It will be your responsibility to devise a topic for this paper, however, I encourage you to talk with me about your reading and research interests at any point during the semester.

**Academic Honesty:** Plagiarism is a violation of scholarly trust. According to the Provost, "Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code. The Code is available for review online at <http://www.umt.edu/SA/VPSA/index.cfm/page/1321>." Violators of the Student Conduct Code will receive an "F" for the offending paper. Each essay you submit must be signed at the bottom of the last page, assuring that the work is your own, except where indicated by proper documentation. Your signature is your word that the essay is free of plagiarism.

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**According to the pace of our discussions, we will deviate from the following schedule from time to time.** Each class I will confirm the assignment for the next class. It's important that you exchange contact information with one of your classmates. Anytime you miss a class you should get in touch with that person to learn if there have been any changes to the schedule.

**9/1 Fri.** Introductions; early history of concepts of the alien; opening questions of the course

**9/4 Mon.** Labor day – no class

- 9/6 Weds.** Post-Darwin conceptions of the alien: H.G. Wells, selections from *The War of the Worlds* (1898) (Moodle); Steven J. Dick, "Extraterrestrials in Literature and the Arts: the Role of Imagination" (book chapter) (Moodle) -- read pp. 222-238.
- 9/8 Fri.** Gregory Benford, "Effing the Ineffable" (article) (Moodle); H.P. Lovecraft, "The Music of Erich Zann" (1922)
- 9/11 Mon.** C.L. Moore, "Shambleau" (1933) (Moodle); Darko Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition" (book chapter) (Moodle)
- 9/13 Weds.** Stanley Weinbaum, "A Martian Odyssey" (1934) (Moodle)
- 9/15 Fri.** H.P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936); China Miéville, "Weird Fiction" (article) (Moodle)
- 9/18 Mon.** Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*
- 9/20 Weds.** Lovecraft, continued
- 9/22 Fri.** Olaf Stapledon, *Star Maker* (1937)
- 9/25 Mon.** *Star Maker*
- 9/27 Weds.** *Star Maker*
- 9/29 Fri.** *Star Maker*; Fredric Jameson, "The Alien Body" (book chapter) (Moodle)
- 10/2 Mon.** John W. Campbell, Jr., "Who Goes There?" (1938) (Moodle)
- 10/4 Weds.** Wendy Pearson, "Alien Cryptographies: the View from Queer" (article) (Moodle)
- 10/6 Fri.** Clifford D. Simak, "Desertion" (1944) (Moodle)
- 10/9 Mon.** Arthur C. Clarke, "The Sentinel" (1951) & Robert Sheckley, "Specialist" (1953) (Moodle)
- 10/11 Weds.** Michael Beehler, "Border Patrols" and J.G. Ballard, "Which Way to Inner Space?" (both articles on Moodle)
- 10/13 Fri.** Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris* (1961)
- 10/16 Mon.** *Solaris*
- 10/18 Weds.** *Solaris*
- 10/20 Fri.** *Solaris*; Ursula Le Guin, "Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown" and Fredric Jameson, "The Unknowability Thesis" (both articles on Moodle)
- 10/23 Mon.** James Tiptree, Jr., "And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side" (1972)
- 10/24 Tues.** **First formal essay due.** Please slide under my office door (LA 217) by 5:00.
- 10/25 Weds.** Tiptree, "The Women Men Don't See" (1973)
- 10/27 Fri.** Tiptree, "The Screwfly Solution" (1977)
- 10/30 Mon.** Tiptree, "Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death" (1973)
- 11/1 Weds.** *Alien*, directed by Ridley Scott (1979)
- 11/3 Fri.** *Alien*; critical reading to be decided
- 11/6 Mon.** Octavia Butler, "Bloodchild" (1984) (Moodle)
- 11/8 Weds.** Reading to be decided
- 11/10 Fri.** **Veterans Day – no class**
- 11/13 Mon.** *District 9*, directed by Neill Blomkamp (2009)
- 11/15 Weds.** *District 9*
- 11/17 Fri.** Gene Wolfe, "Useful Phrases" (1992) (Moodle)
- 11/20 Mon.** China Miéville, *Embassytown* (2011)

**11/22 Weds. Student travel day - no class**  
**11/24 Fri. Thanksgiving break - no class**

**11/27 Mon.** *Embassytown*  
**11/29 Weds.** *Embassytown*  
**12/1 Fri.** *Embassytown*

**12/4 Mon.** Reading to be decided  
**12/6 Weds.** Ted Chiang, "Story of Your Life" (1998) (Moodle)  
**12/8 Fri.** *Arrival* (2016)

**12/11 Mon.** Conclusions and extrapolations.

**Term paper due Friday, December 15 by high noon (please slide yours under my office door)**

**There is no final exam for this class.**