

Science Fiction Studies MA

Programme code: MA/SCIFISTDS
Major code: ELKA
Programme length: 1 year full-time
(annual intake)
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Programme outline

This programme builds upon the current widespread interest in Science Fiction and draws on the University's archive of Science Fiction, unrivalled in Europe. At the heart of Science Fiction lies a speculative energy which we examine in relation to such issues as gender and the limits of the genre. The programme material is mainly twentieth century and written in English, though some continental writers, such as Yevgeny Zamyatin and Stanislaw Lem, are also included. The programme is intended for students who have already completed an undergraduate degree in English or kindred studies, and aims to enable students:

- to read and interpret with competence a range of Science Fiction
- to compare and contrast these texts
- to compare and contrast the cultural contexts in which they were produced
- to relate this literature to appropriate criticism
- to work under supervision towards the completion of a project of research
- to develop competence in the bibliographical skills required for the undertaking and presentation of scholarly research
- to make a clear presentation of some aspect of the research that is being undertaken, and to respond to questions on what has been presented
- to construct a cogent and sustained written exposition of research findings.

Programme content

Students take two taught modules in semester one and two in semester two. In the summer term, students are supervised by a tutor in independent research and in the writing up of that research in the form of a dissertation. Students are also required to attend a series of seminars in Research and Bibliographic skills.

The taught modules currently offered are as follows:

Semester one

- Genre Definitions
- Time and Consciousness
- Research Skills (English Literature)

Semester two

- Utopias and Dystopias

- Special Author: H G Wells and Modern Science Fiction

Summer

- 15,000 word dissertation

Learning, Teaching and Assessment

All the taught modules are delivered by means of weekly two-hour seminars. Oral presentations may be required in the seminars. Assessment is by essay for four of the modules, variously of 3,000 and 5,000-words length. The preliminary project is assessed by oral presentation and by production of a written Project (between 1,500 and 3,000 words). A final dissertation also has to be produced, of 15,000 words length.

Programme modules

Genre Definitions

The purpose of this module is to introduce students to the critical debate within the field of Science Fiction and to some of the early and fundamental concepts of what Science Fiction is and what it does. Comparison of science fiction texts and cinematic adaptations will enable analysis of the potentialities and limitations of each medium. Texts and films which overlap with the horror genre will be studied to develop questions of generic hybridity and how this facilitates questions of bodily and gendered identity. The second part of the module will compare "mainstream" Science Fiction texts (mainly short stories for convenience of sampling) with selected texts which, while not being quite Science Fiction in the usual understanding, might be considered to be exploring comparable imaginative territory. This part of the module attempts to address a most basic question as directly as possible: what does Science Fiction do that other kinds of writing don't, or can't?

Time and Consciousness

(taught by the Department of Philosophy)

The aim of this module is to examine some of the philosophical questions raised by Science Fiction. Science Fiction allows difficult conceptual questions to be asked through the medium of fiction. Questions which relate to the philosophy of mind and moral philosophy are raised by robot narratives such as those by Asimov, whilst time-travel fantasies and alternative histories can challenge the notion of causality, or question the nature and status of time. Science Fiction texts will be used as the starting-point for discussion of a range of related philosophical questions, focusing on the issues of time and consciousness.

Research Skills (*English Literature*)

This module seeks to develop critical skills (practical and theoretical), linguistic skills, and historical expertise. At the core of research in English studies is the art of using, differentiating between and testing the validity of a variety of sophisticated theoretical concepts as well as that of developing research and analytic capacities through the encounter with complex kinds of writing and reading.

Utopias and Dystopias

This module examines the intimate relation between Science Fiction and the utopian imagination. Science Fiction has permitted utopian imaginings often premised upon the supposed premises of science. Profound fears about the modern world have been articulated through dystopian fictions. Feminist Science Fiction has found the tropes and literary conventions of utopian and dystopian fiction useful as the means to envisage post-patriarchal possibilities or warn against sexist ideologies. During the course of the module, a range of utopian and dystopian writing from the late nineteenth century to the present day will be studied.

H G Wells and Modern Science Fiction

This module will examine the work of one of the "Founding Fathers" of Science Fiction before the genre crystallised as a named mode of writing, and will look at how the work of Wells influenced Science Fiction in the twentieth century. Selected reading will show how the influence of Wells is still a major force in Science Fiction. This module will encourage students to look at works explicitly or implicitly influenced by Wells, as well as the primary texts, and will bring together the strands of technocratic utopianism and scientific speculation.