

LT242 Utopian and Dystopian Visions

Seminar Leader: Dr. phil. Sladja Blažan
Email: s.blazan@berlin.bard.edu
Office Hours: by appointment

Course Description

Fiction has always sought to create other worlds, either full of promising, paradisaical allure, or laden with doom and disaster. What specifically characterizes these kinds of narratives, which seem to seek not to represent present-day reality as it is but to create a total system that is either alternative to current conditions, or presages a terrible future? Both utopian and dystopian fictions do reflect the actual contexts in which they were written, bearing the imprint of social tensions, hopes, and fears, or perhaps even aiming to show that (in the case of dystopias) we have already arrived at the nightmare to come, or that (in utopian dreams) we have the capacity to transcend existing injustices and abuses. In this course, we will cover the history of modern utopian and dystopian literature from the Renaissance to the present, including the role of technology, the environment, and political and economic systems of thought. Our goal will also be to see how such texts examine the problems affecting their own historical moment. How did the perception of the nature of an ideal / defective society change? We will think about the values of literary utopias and dystopias for social theory. Our final goal will be to imagine differently. What kinds of stories are going to shift the prevailing narrative of what it means to be human? Authors addressed include, among others, Margaret Cavendish, Edward Bellamy, Begum Rokeya, E. M. Forster, Margaret Atwood, Vandana Singh, and Novuyo Rosa Tshuma.

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Assignments

Mid-term essay 2000 words

Final essay 3000 words

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion.

Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

The percentage grade allotted to each essay or examination, other assignments, and classroom participation:

- seminar preparation and participation 30% for the semester, 15% for weeks 1-7 and 15% for weeks 8-14
- final paper 70 %

Schedule

Week 1, January 28, 2025: Introduction

Required Reading:

- Plato, *Republic*, Book V
- SARGENT, LYMAN TOWER. "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1994, pp. 1–37. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719246>. Accessed 6 Mar. 2024.

Week 2, February 4, 2025: Nuclear Waste

Please note, we will meet for our regular class 9-12 and for an evening class!

Required Reading: Gabriele Schwab, "Introduction." *Radioactive Ghosts*, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp, 1-38.

Required Attendance: Evening Panel with Jennifer Richter on nuclear waste, speculative fiction, and energy futures.

Week 3, February 11, 2025

No morning class – instead required attendance: evening panel on February 4, 2025 and exhibition or reading in the city (to be scheduled in class)

Week 4, February 18, 2025 The Origins of Utopia I

Required Reading:

- Excerpts from Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516)
- Ruth Levitas, "Ideal Commonwealths: The Emerging Tradition." *The Concept of Utopia*. Peter Lang, 2010, pp. 11-40.

Week 5, February 25, 2025: The Origins of Utopia II

Required Reading:

- Margaret Cavendish, Excerpts from *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666)

- Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (Begum Rokeya), *Sultana's Dream* (1905). Online available here: <https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/sultana/dream/dream.html>
- Erin Lang Bonin, "Margaret Cavendish's Dramatic Utopias and the Politics of Gender." *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, volume 40, number 2, Spring 2000, pp. 339-354.

Week 6, March 4, 2025: The Origins of Dystopia I

Required Reading: E. M. Forster, "The Machine Stops" (1909)

Week 7, March 11, 2025: The Origins of Dystopia II

Required Reading: Excerpts from Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We* (1920, trsl. Gregory Zilboorg 1924)

Midterm papers due March 16, 2025

Week 8, March 18, 2025: Defamiliarization / The V-Effect

Required Reading:

- Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), particularly "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction?"
- Fredric Jameson. "Utopia as a Method, or the Uses of the Future." *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*, edited by Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley and Gyan Prakash, Princeton UP, 2011. pp. 22-40.

Week 9, March 25, 2025: Utopian Dystopias

Required Reading: Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, Four Walls, 1993.

Week 10, April 1, 2025

Required Reading:

- Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, Four Walls, 1993.
- Vandana Singh. "Utopias of the Third Kind"

Week 11, April 8, 2025: Guest Session

Guest session with Prof. Alison Sperling

Required Reading: Knouf, Adriana. „Xenological Temporalities in the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence, Lovecraft, and Transgender Experiences.“ *Studies in the Fantastic*, volume 9, number 1, pp. 23-43, doi:10.1353/sif.2020.0001.

April 15, 2025: Spring Break

No class!

Week 12, April 22, 2025: The Black Speculative Arts Movement

Required Reading/Viewing:

- Sun Ra, *Space is the Place* (watch online)
- Wanuri Kahiu, *Pumzi* (watch online)
- Wanuri Kahiu at TEDxNairobi on <https://www.bsam-art.com/>
- Quiana Whitted, "To be African is to Merge Technology and Magic": An Interview with Nnedi Okorafor

Week 13, April 29, 2025: **Feminist Utopia**

Required Reading: Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Knopf, 1976.

Week 14, May 6, 2025: **Science and Utopia/Dystopia**

Required Reading: Novuyo Rosa Tshuma, *Digging Stars*, Norton, 2023. (excerpts)

Final papers due for graduating students on May 6, 2025

Week 15, May 13, 2025: **Completion Week**

Final paper consultation

Final papers due for non-graduating students on May 23, 2025