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Maps for Further Exploring: Experiences from Helsinki Summer School Course “Science Fiction in Literature and Culture”

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In August 2014 we held a course of “Science Fiction in Literature and Culture”¹ at the Helsinki Summer School, which is an international academic event that takes place every August at the University of Helsinki and offers three-week intensive courses on a wide variety of specialized topics.

The course objective was to provide the students a concise view of the birth of science fiction as a literary genre, its development and its increasingly ambitious themes which both connect with, and propose to change reality. Our class topics included the history and definitions of science fiction, SF in different media (TV, films, games), the relationship between SF and both natural and human sciences, and the study of SF fan culture. We also strived to direct the students’ attention to some of the central themes present in contemporary science fiction, among them identity politics, posthumanism and postcolonialism, and also to explore some of the formal ways in which SF creates its weird worlds and temporalities.

The course included lectures by specialists in various areas of science fiction research, and in-class discussions based on the lectures and assigned readings. In addition to class attendance, the requirements included assigned readings of Hannu Rajaniemi’s novel *The Quantum Thief* (2010), short stories and theoretical texts, and a learning journal that the students revised and submitted for grading at the end of the course.

The course program, including the assigned readings,² was as follows:

Week 1

Session 1: Practicalities

Session 2: Definitions of Science Fiction, Genre literature

Session 3: History I: “From Frankenstein to the Golden Age.” Assigned reading: *Frankenstein*, chapters II-IV, vol. I.; Asimov’s “Runaround”

Session 4: History II: “From New Wave to New Weird.” Assigned reading: Gene Wolfe, “The Death of Dr. Island”

Session 5: Subgenres I: Hard SF. Tow Godwin, “Cold Equations”

Session 6: Subgenres II: Soft SF. Jack Vance, “Dodkin’s Job”

¹ The course was organized by a group of Finnish SF researchers; course coordinator Päivi Vääänen, Dr. Merja Polvinen, who also acted as the course director, Mika Lopenen and myself, and we also taught several lectures each. In addition to this, we had guest lectures by Dr. Irma Hirsjärvi, Kaisa Kortekallio, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, Hanna-Riikka Roine, and Dr. Howard Sklar.

² The fairly extensive course reading list aimed at offering the students a look at some of the genre classics while also giving insight into new works in the field. In addition to the texts mentioned in this program, the students read *The Quantum Thief* before the course and used *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* as its textbook. In addition to this, students with no background in literary studies were expected to catch up by reading Peter Barry’s *Beginning Theory: Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* prior to the course.

Week 2

Session 7: Science fiction games. Johanna Koljonen, "Carolus Rex." In *Nordic Larp*

Session 8: Fan studies

Session 9: Sciences in science fiction

Session 10: Humanities in science fiction. Ted Chiang, "Story of Your Life"

Session 11: African American SF. Nnedi Okorafor, "The Magical Negro"

Session 12: Colonialism/Postcolonialism. Octavia Butler, "Bloodchild"

Session 13: Posthuman subjectivity

Session 14: Student presentations on SF in their country

Session 15: Student presentations continue

Week 3

Session 16: SF and media

Session 17: SF and narratology

Session 18: Fictional worlds.

Session 19: it's about time. Also this class used Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life"

Session 20: SF and your brain

Session 21: SF, metaphor and allegory. Catherynne M. Valente, "Silently and Very Fast"

Session 22: Group work on course journals

Session 23: Realistic assumptions. Excerpt from Ursula Le Guin's "Betrayals," Octavia Butler, *Kindred* chapters "The Prologue," "The River," and "The Fire"

Session 24: Summing up

The following is a report on our experiences and the challenges we encountered while teaching the course, and a discussion on ways to meet those challenges on next versions of the course, including some student and teacher interviews. We hope this will also provide ideas for others planning similar courses.

Making SF teaching more accessible also outside the Anglo-American academic world

In many American (and some British) colleges and universities there already exists something of a tradition in teaching SF – demonstrated also by the fact that all the major academic journals in this field are British or American (*Science Fiction Studies*, *Extrapolation*, *Journal of Fantastic in the Arts*, *Foundation*). In contrast, in the continental Europe, Scandinavia, and Asia, the prospects of studying science fiction literature or other media are often left to scattered courses dependent on individual teachers enthusiastic enough to set them up. While for example Andy Sawyer and Peter Wright in *Teaching Science Fiction* are able to track the history of the growing acceptance of SF research (3–5), they do this with regard to the Anglo-American academia.

Science fiction is only now starting to receive serious attention also in the rest of the academic world. Still, even today teachers and researchers may often find it difficult to get the academia in general to recognize the need to study science fiction, and in particular to convince their departments of the value of doing so. As one of our visiting teachers, Dr. Irma Hirsjärvi from Research Centre of Contemporary Culture at the University of Jyväskylä noted, from the point of view of the Finnish academic "the stigma of popular culture and UFO stories or sort of nonsense is still hovering on the genre, despite the several decades of legitimation project." On our part, we sought to address these issues by offering a course that takes the field seriously, utilizes an

interdisciplinary approach, and gives access to SF scholarship to the international student base created by the Helsinki Summer School.

Fortunately, the Summer School was enthusiastic about our course proposal, and validating the study of SF turned out not to be a particular issue in our case. In general, the teachers of our course felt no need to justify the study of SF to the students either, as many of them came from the SF fan background. The teachers found themselves using largely the same methods to teach SF as they do on other literature courses, although some additional concepts and theories were needed to take into account the speculative and non-realistic dimensions of the genre, as Dr. Howard Sklar pointed out. On the other hand, some of the students also came from fandom with an already strong appreciation of the genre, and seemed to take the value of SF as an intrinsic quality. During these discussions, the teachers found it necessary to step back and urge the students to consider the larger socio-cultural implications of the genre and its connection with the mainstream literary establishment. The course aimed to help students look past generalizations and stereotypes of the genre, while also analysing the origins of those stereotypes and pointing out the literary self-awareness of science fiction, from the 1940s Golden Age era onwards.

Student backgrounds and their general experiences from the course

The Helsinki Summer School system brought in a wide variety of students with different cultural backgrounds and fields of study. They came from eight countries: Lithuania, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United States, China and Japan – and numerous disciplines, from literary studies, psychology and linguistics to creative writing and business administration, to name a few. Some of the students applied for the course because they were fans of science fiction, but many also viewed it as an opportunity to combine an interesting topic with an experience of studying in a foreign country, even if they were not very familiar with the genre. For many of the students this seemed a rare chance of studying SF, as they explained that at their home universities they are hard pressed to find courses that would focus on science fiction, let alone fit them in their study plans.

There were also returning students who had participated in some other HSS courses the previous year, like Regina Kanyu Wang from Fudan University, China, and Simona Falato from University of Rome Tor Vergata, who came to repeat their Summer School experiences.

Some of the students came from fields not related to humanities and only a few of them had previous experience of cultural or literary studies as such, but they liked the multidisciplinary approach and the way our guest lecturers were able to offer in-depth sessions on their specialized fields. For example Neal Simons, majoring in English at Finlandia University, Hancock, MI., appreciated the course's fluidity combined with its underlying structure, saying: "I liked how we always had different [teachers] for each class, each one specializing in the field that he/she was talking about. You could feel the enthusiasm and passion as they spoke." This enthusiasm that a researcher feels at a receptive audience of their chosen field was contagious and also led to lively in-class discussions that only rarely needed encouragement.

Student presentations and discussions at the course

During the course, the students were also asked to give presentations on science fiction in their own countries, with the view of providing both the students and the teachers an insight into works of SF that we might not otherwise encounter. As the globally present Anglo-American tradition in SF may often obscure more local works, the students were delighted to discover a science fiction heritage in their own countries. Lithuanian Oksana Grajauskaitė, who is currently working on a BA in Creative

Writing at the University of East London, said: “I discovered that my country actually *does have* a history of sci-fi, I was under impression that it's non-existent.” The same was true also of the Italian tradition for Simona Falato and Alice Carbone, who majors in psychology at the La Sapienza Rome University, as they listed Dino Buzzati's *The Great Portrait* and Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* among the discoveries they made while preparing their presentation.

In addition to broadening perspectives beyond the usual Anglo-American canon, the student presentations also helped to add to the issues discussed in the lectures, for example to “rethink the limits of forms in which sci-fi can exist, and ask ... can a theatrical performance be sci-fi,” as Oksana noted. Or as Neal pointed out, to analyse more in depth the significance of science fiction in the USA as an affirmation and a source of national mythology in a young nation – leading to fruitful discussions about how science fiction often ends up being thematically representative of the authors' own time, even if the plot takes place in some completely different temporal or spatial universe.

With regard to the fluid nature of the course that the lively discussions created, one of our teachers, Kaisa Kortekallio from the University of Helsinki, noted when looking back at giving a lecture on posthuman subjectivity: “When teaching a class on contemporary science fiction, it's almost impossible to keep fiction apart from actual events. Talking about cyborg characters leads to discussion about our relation to everyday technology, talking about genetically modified posthumans leads to discussion about stem cell research. I find this a positive aspect, especially when the course is titled ‘Science fiction in literature and culture.’”

Mark Brake and Neil Hook point out that science fiction is often taught without linking it with the actual sciences that it draws on (*Teaching SF* 203). For our part, we sought to address this issue with Päivi Väättänen's lecture on sciences in science fiction, and as she noted, also the students found this connection between the science and the fiction fascinating. With today's speculative science, it is sometimes hard to draw the line between science and science fiction - or even pseudoscience - and the class discussions on the topic were lively. Väättänen's class got to try out all three aspects in an exercise where, divided into small groups, they described a planet with certain conditions, gave it to the next group to describe a plant living in that world, and so on along the food chain. As the Helsinki Summer School is always open for alternative teaching methods, the course was also a good place to try out fun approaches alongside the more theoretical discussions.

As for the literary theoretical side of things, the interest shown by the more advanced students would have well warranted delving more deeply into matters like the definitions of science fiction, the sense of wonder, and their theoretical implications. However, a short intensive course like this that has to take into account the students' varying backgrounds and entry levels makes it difficult to cater for all levels at once. In hindsight, it would be good to have some way of assigning alternative projects to groups on different levels to facilitate their interest so that the more theoretical discussions could be held, while also making sure that most students leave the course satisfied that they have been able to follow the general strain of teaching.

Some of the issues raised frequently in the discussions were the race and gender conventions, and the (often even overt) sexism in SF storylines and characters. In addition to the lectures focusing on these issues, attention to these matters arose from students who were actively interested in the topics of race and gender equality through their own studies, and they also challenged the other students' assumptions or attempts to dismiss these matters in the discussions. The students seemed to be inspired by this enthusiastic participation as they realized the many levels of relevance to cultural and societal concerns in science fiction. All in all, this resulted in fruitful debates, but also reminded the teachers of the need to be able also to sum things up and move on – when the debate could have carried on indefinitely.

Because of the enthusiastic discussions, we felt that debates and discussions should perhaps be allotted even more space within the next iteration of the course, provided of course that the next group is as motivated as this one.

The pedagogical potential of SF

The course syllabus was planned according to the idea, voiced for example by Lisa Yaszek, that if an effective SF critic ought to work also in the realm of the cultural historian, also students of SF should from the beginning be led to the direction of considering science fiction as cultural history (Yaszek 113). As she sees it, science fiction is “a body of literature that developed in tandem with modern literary, political and technoscientific systems” so that students can be encouraged to “make active connections between individual sf texts and other primary scientific and social documents” (ibid).

To some extent we were able to anticipate the fact that coming from various academic disciplines, even those students who took the course because they were SF fans, might not be familiar with the cultural-literary-analytic approach we adopted. Indeed, one of the tasks the teachers faced (and which would certainly require even more attention next time around) was to help the students distinguish between the discourse and terminology that originates in the fandom, the marketing discourse that the everyday consumer of SF entertainment encounters, and the discourse and approach of the scholars and the academics (see also Wolfe 38–54; Sawyer and Wright 12–13). In terms of literary criticism, the lectures sought to address these issues by showing how the chosen themes and historical/cultural developments were visible in the texts discussed by giving the students tools they can actually use to analyse the texts. As Sawyer and Wright put it:

Students who take pleasure in science fiction’s speculative qualities, its engendering of a sense of wonder or estrangement, its exploitation of language’s rich possibilities and inherent tensions, can be introduced to theoretical concepts and reading protocols specific to the genre which will enhance both their learning experiences and their understanding of literature’s diverse potential. (6)

However, because of the variety in the students’ entry levels, at times this noble objective had to recede into the background in favour of explaining the more basic notions that would then enable the students to explore the more complex issues. On the other hand, this also generated interesting debates, as the more well-versed students eagerly contributed to these explications. While many of the students who were not familiar with the whole concept of close reading or literary analysis in general first struggled with this kind of an approach, in the end they appreciated the way the texts opened up in a new way. Ideally, we would want the students to familiarise themselves with some basics of literary, media or cultural criticism before the course begins (e.g. the recommended volume by Barry), but this is difficult without making the course reading list even heavier than it now was. Ultimately, however, this version of the course was planned to be accessible for students from various fields; therefore, we strove to keep the literary theory to the minimum.

The assigned texts

For the course as a whole, the question of what to choose as material was a considerable challenge. In the end we decided on a selection of canonical texts which would illustrate the birth of the canon and enable discussions on the development of themes and the origins of certain (stereotypical) motifs and narratives – accompanied by texts less frequently seen to broaden the vista also for the

students already well-versed in the genre. In addition to this, we let the guest lecturers assign texts that suited their own presentations best.

To fuse the cultural history and criticism with the more theoretical issues, our selection of assigned reading and the course structure was devised to first give the students a basic run-through of the history of SF and the development of its themes to make sure everyone is closer to the same starting level, and only after this to investigate certain themes in more depth.

Ted Chiang's "The Story of Your Life" was one of the student favourites, and as Dr. Merja Polvinen, our course director from the University of Helsinki and Collegium for Advanced Studies notes: "Chiang dealt with temporal conventions in a way that I found immensely useful for explaining narrative temporality to students, and it has generally been received well - this time also." The other work to gather most attention from the students was Rajaniemi's *Quantum Thief*. Partly this was of course because it was the only novel-length text and was to be read before the course began. The role of Rajaniemi's novel was also emphasised by the fact that throughout the course, it was used as a touchstone for discussing many of the course themes and concepts, ranging from hard SF and posthumanism to metaphor and cognitive studies. In addition to the students' initial bafflement with the 'difficulty' of the novel, it also sparked discussions like the session on SF television by Aino-Kaisa Koistinen from University of Jyväskylä, where she led the students to consider the possibilities and difficulties of audiovisual science fiction narratives through a group work on what a TV adaptation of *Quantum Thief* might look like.

If the literary theory proved to be challenging for the non-literature students, that was also the case with some of the assigned texts. As Merja Polvinen said: "the text I would change is Valente's "Silently and Very Fast" - it was clearly too long and too difficult for students on this level, and its particular themes (metaphorical thinking) can be dealt with through other texts." Personally, on the next version of the course I might drop Tom Godwin's "Cold Equations" in favour of using Asimov's "Runaround" both for the discussion on hard science fiction and SF history, alongside with the *Frankenstein* excerpt, to leave more room for in-depth analysis and discussion that the students can engage in. In general, many of our teachers felt that next time we might do well to shorten the reading list and leave more room for discussions – and give the students time to get more in depth with specific texts.

Experiences, challenges and lessons for future course planning

For the students, the course was very work-intensive and the long reading list was clearly a challenge to many. Rajaniemi's *Quantum Thief* was almost uniformly felt to be the most difficult text, especially for the students who were less familiar with the genre's tropes and vocabulary. However, in the end it thankfully proved for many also the most interesting one, properly opening up only in the in-class discussions that analysed its complex themes and allowed the students to share their initial confusion when reading it. Despite the initial difficulty, many found the work rewarding, in the end "restoring my faith in modern sci-fi and reinvigorat[ing] me in a way," as Neal put it. Among the most educational texts, the students listed Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild" and Shelley's *Frankenstein*, undoubtedly for the strong ethical issues they raised. Another favourite along with Rajaniemi seemed to be Chiang's "The Story of Your Life" which stood out for its narrative style. For example to Oksana, it amounted to "the most beautiful thing I have read in my life so far." Chiang's compact yet complex story elicited enthusiastic replies both with regard to the linguistic and philosophical themes and the narrative structure.

Coming in with such different levels of familiarity with the genre, some of the students found themselves introduced to much greater variety than they expected also with regard to the assigned readings. For example Alice said: "When I started the course I didn't know anything about

Science Fiction and I thought that the whole genre was about robots, space or aliens.” On the other hand, some of the students who were already deeper into the genre found the course to expand their existing understanding of, seeing is as “a map for further exploring,” as Oksana said. With regard to our objectives, these enthusiastic comments seemed to prove our course objective satisfactorily reached.

However, one of the surprises was the divergence in the students’ language skills. While there were native speakers and students who spoke English as their second language with ease and actively participated in the discussions, there were also a number of students who were visibly shy about expressing themselves in English. This proved to be a challenge throughout the course, and necessitated the teachers to act as moderators of the in-class discussions. In practice, from time to time we also had to ask the students to rearrange into different groups for their discussions to make sure that all of the students got to participate in the discussion. The differences in language skills were also visible in the students’ learning journals where it became obvious that some had difficulties grasping the more complex concepts during the lectures. The students were required to submit their journal entries soon after each lecture, and as the teachers were reading these alongside the course, we were able to revisit some of the subjects that seemed to need more elucidation. In hindsight, this is also a practical issue that could be remedied by requiring a certain level of language competence from the students accepted to the course. Letting the students clearly know in advance the language skills required to successfully take part in the course would also benefit the students.

While the language issue was something of a surprise, we were better prepared for the differences in the students’ familiarity with the genre and its canon, and all of our teachers tried to take this into account. Rather than a cultural difference, for example Dr. Hirsjärvi noticed considerable differences between the individual students’ ability to understand the nature of the genre. Hanna-Riikka Roine from University of Tampere, who gave a guest lecture on science-fictional worlds from the point of view of game studies, also found that her specialised topic brought these divisions clearly to the fore: “some students were immediately able to put the games discussed in class into wider perspective and into relation with other games (and question, for example, my choice to classify the games as RPGs) while others had perhaps played *Tetris* once in their lives.” However, she saw this also as a more general problem with regard to lectures on game studies to less specialized audiences. As she noted, the course needs to be able to find a balance between giving the newcomers an introduction to the genre, while giving also the hardcore fans something new to chew on. An additional thing to consider is the fact that the students who come to the course as members of fandom may be very well versed in SF canon, or at least very enthusiastic about certain works, but they may easily look at the genre so exclusively through the “fannish” glasses that they find it difficult to critically analyse their beloved works.

For the teacher, there are several challenges in encountering such a varied group of participants. Having taught several rounds of SF courses both in Finland and abroad, Dr. Polvinen noted: “In general, I do think that SF courses run the risk of implying that they will be easy – this has a lot to do with the image of SF as a popular form of art/literature, which leads people to think they will only have to read fun stuff and not work very hard.” This certainly was the implication from some of our course feedback: our extensive reading list and work-intensive classes seemed to have resulted in one of the most demanding courses within the Summer School syllabus for that year, and some of the students found this to be a bit of a shock, even when they found the learning experience also rewarding.

Conclusions

To sum up, organising the course was a positive experience and left us filled with ideas. The student presentations were felt to be successful in exploring voices different from the Anglo-American canon, and they ended up educating both the students and ourselves on the science fiction traditions in their native countries. This is definitely something we will see in the next version of the course as well, perhaps allocating more time for them and the resulting discussion. In general, too, we felt that if the next group of students seem as able to engage in thoughtful discussions on the topics, they should definitely receive more time to do so. Also our reading list needs to be slightly slimmed down to leave more time for more in-depth sessions. In addition to this, we realized the need to specify more clearly the level of language skills expected for successfully participating in the course. The highly varied student body that a course like this gathers can create both its weaknesses – some will feel it is too easy, while for some it is clearly too difficult – as well as its strengths – the interdisciplinary and intercultural discussions.

The interview sections are a result of a series of email interviews with the Summer School teachers and students and are quoted with their permission.

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