Reading Reponses/Guest Posts

1. Reading Response 9/7: Introduction to *The Glass Bees* by Ernst Jünger

   The introduction written by Bruce Sterling to The Glass Bees by Ernst Jünger is a very appropriate setup to the story that unfolds. It examines the life of the author and how he survived through the first half of the 20th century through multiple forms of government in his country of Germany and all the chaos and turmoil that pursued. Sterling mentions that Jünger had served his countries in both world wars in his youth. He also cares to elaborate on the fact that he had so enthusiastically signed up to serve his country in the First World War in a haze of patriotic fervor while reluctantly putting on his uniform for the second. He had been so traumatized and disheartened by the horrors of that first tumultuous conflict that he made it his duty to criticize both war itself and the new regime he very much regretted fighting for that went against all of his values and beliefs. These details are imperative to comprehend in order to understand a particular area in the story. As we first meet our protagonist, a man introduced to us as Captain Richard, we are made aware of both his present circumstances and those that led up to them within the first few chapters. We learn that he, like the author of the story, had served in the military as a young man and, soon after sacrificing his life for his country, would find himself destitute and in desperate need of work. This scenario replicates that of the turmoil experienced by citizens of Jünger's country after both wars came to a disastrous conclusion. The soldiers that fought in both the fictional and real-life wars sacrificed everything to protect their homeland and loved ones. However, upon their return after the war's conclusion, they found themselves at the behest of a semi-grateful yet largely indifferent nation that provided them with little praise for their services and barely any aid in moving on with their lives. This notion is portrayed perfectly in the novel. On pages 29-30, Captain Richard sums up his experiences as a soldier alongside two of his comrades, who have all aged considerably and have severe financial burdens to worry about. He reminisces about the old times and how back in their day, the general population heavily respected their soldiers and offered them their sincere gratitude wherever they decided to lead their lives. Now, as the three men sit around, aging and still in desperate need of stable employment, Captain Richard loathes that people have become "more mechanical, more calculable, and often you hardly felt that you were among human beings." This observation must have been made by Junger as well when he returned home from war to a defeated country incapable of celebrating the sacrifice and dedication of their soldiers in light of new worries and shows his pessimistic overview of the direction that the human race is moving towards.

2. Reading Response 9/14: Passage Analysis from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sleep?* by Philip K. Dick

   "On his own console he dialed for a creative and fresh attitude toward his job, although this he hardly needed; such was his habitual, innate approach without recourse to Penfield artificial brain stimulation" (7).

   The world we are introduced to in Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep by Phillip K. Dick is one that is fairly on par with the characteristics of a classic science fiction setting. The novel takes place sometime in the not-so-distant future and is one completely unfamiliar to us in our current period of time. The environmental conditions of Earth are very poorly; the atmosphere is heavily polluted as a result of a global conflict known as World War Terminus

(W.W.T.) and only those deemed physically and mentally worthy have moved off the planet. Not only this, but the very way of life has been altered drastically to the point where people rely on machines to not only do their labor and tasks for them but also to help them experience basic feelings and emotions. Machines have been integrated into life so exceedingly that one of the major issues of the plot is figuring out how to properly distinguish androids from actual human beings. Some androids have been built so efficiently and realistically that there are several cases where even they aren't aware they are androids and live life thinking they are actually human. This leaves the reader to question if there is any natural and unaltered human behavior left in the world. Even those who are introduced to us as human beings typically meet the same qualifications that define the behavior of an android. They rely on machines to experience basic emotions and can control when they want to feel sad or happy. Most even fail to show signs of the most important emotion that our protagonist Rick Deckard uses to differentiate androids and humans; empathy. His superior, Harry Bryant, seems to show none in regards to Rick's partner, Dave Holden, being severely injured by an android and the only concern he shows towards Dave's health is that he will no longer be able to hunt any more androids down. Rick's wife, Iran, is entirely beset on fixing her own emotions mechanically and shows absolutely no sign of intimate empathy towards her husband in the slightest. The only character who places any hope in the minds of the audience is Rick, which the above sentence makes clear does not need emotional stimulants. He is one of the only characters to show empathy towards not only humans, but androids as well. The character of Rick lays out the exact qualifications that make up an actual human being, someone who doesn't rely on machines to make him feel and who can be empathetic towards even those he is hired to destroy. For all of Rick's flaws in the novel and his immense feeling of dissatisfaction with his current life, simply being able to have feelings regarding other people places him in opposition to the robotic, soulless climate of the novel.

3. Reading Response 9/28: Communism, Socialist Realism, & Science Fiction

From the very foundation of the Soviet Union in 1917 and throughout its more than seventy years of existence, the most concerning aspects of running the government to its officials involved creating policies that both reflected the goals of Marxist theory and would allow both the nation and, eventually, the rest of the world to evolve into a utopian and classless society. For the first era of Soviet politics, under the leadership of Lenin and then Stalin, the primary concern for state officials was to establish and develop a national political and economic doctrine that would favor the interests of the proletariat masses as opposed to the "bourgeois" state of affairs that had, in their eyes, plunged the former Imperial Russia into turmoil. Once this doctrine was more or less established and the Soviet Union had proved itself to be a highly efficient and significantly powerful nation after World War II, state officials were then concerned with spreading their nation's influence to surrounding lands in the midst of the Cold War. They were looking to persuade peoples who had suffered under the rule of capitalist and imperial governments to adopt their views and ideology once they had gained their independence. One area that received a substantial amount of attention in regards to transmitting the desired Soviet image of equality and fairness was literature. State officials in the 1930s had established an organization for writers and novelists to spread that message through all forms of media and literature. The head of this organization, Andrei Zhdanov, stressed to its members the importance of portraying Soviet literature as the preferred

alternative to that of the “unimaginative and decaying bourgeois” type. He states that their work may be criticized by enemy forces as “tendentious” (composed or written with the intention of spreading a particular tendency or aim), but it is in fact this very feature of Soviet literature that will separate their work from the prejudiced bourgeois agenda; that they should focus on expressing the righteous aims of the Soviet government within the confines of the pieces they produce. Eventually, towards the middle of the Cold War, the genre of science fiction entered the foray of Soviet state concerns. As rendered by Nikolay Toman in 1965, party sessions were held to determine the best use of the genre in promoting Soviet interests. Most officials wanted to limit the scope of what it could achieve, worrying of the consequences of depicting worlds with seemingly no scientific rationalism; however, some writers understood its significance and that it could be used to portray the utopian society Soviet policies aimed to achieve. It was here, during the “dethawing” age under Nikita Kruschev, that several Eastern European science fiction pieces came into existence, such as works from Stanislaw Lem and the Strugatsky Brothers.

4. Reading Response 10/19: Sequence analysis from Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* (1972)

   Sequence 1:57:00-2:06:42
   Stanislaw Lem wrote his acclaimed 1961 science fiction novel Solaris with the intention of examining the limits of human cognition and to determine that, no matter how hard mankind tries, there is a vast plethora of ideas and concepts that are beyond its capability of comprehension. This crucial theme is translated into its film adaptation, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky in 1972, on several occasions but is not always presented as the story’s primary message. One particular scene in the film (the celebration of Snaut’s birthday in the station’s library) analyzes Lem’s theme regarding human cognition alongside another idea that suggests man is reluctant towards scientific progress both out of fear of the unknown and the comfort he has with the current boundaries of his knowledge. As Snaut finally enters the library where he meets his comrade, the setting becomes more familiar to the audience, who have been submerged into long, winding metallic corridors with eerie sounds and luminescent strips of light for the better part of the film. The camera generally stays grounded and stable so as to tone down the strange atmosphere of the space station (the shots during the majority of the film generally consist of wide frames that zoom in and out at a snail’s space to place a sense of distress in the viewer). The library is full of relics from all throughout the course of human history, from sculpted busts of ancient figures to candlelights illuminating texts of nostalgic stories, demonstrating man’s desire to keep his connection to his past even when on a foreign planet. Snaut voices the main notion presented by Tarkovsky in this scene in his own words as the camera cuts between his body language that expresses both excitement and concern and the smug, expressionless face of Sartorius. Sartorius rejects the idea as utter nonsense, that man’s primary duty is to learn and understand everything that nature has to offer him and that he is both capable and willing to do so. Up until that point, we have only known him to be completely dedicated to his work, rarely leaving his laboratory in efforts to understand the great mysteries that the planet has unleashed on them. He so desperately wants to believe that he is in full control of all the affairs that occur in the station as well as feel mentally and culturally superior to everyone else onboard. However, the mise-en-scène in this scene completely debunks those notions as it shows Sartorius wearing a casual sweater and khakis to an event that the two others have dressed up in suits for, as well as focusing in on the scars on his forehead and

the instance in which he drops and shatters his glasses. Sartorius's attitude is countered by Hari, who calls him cruel for failing to consider the moral aspect of his scientific work regarding the guests and as we see Kelvin bend down in admiration for her and what she represents, Sartorius screams at him to get up. This scene perfectly sums up the main idea that Lem's original novel portrayed while implementing cinematic details to resonate it alongside Tarkovsky's own themes.

5. Reading Response 11/2: Analysis of the Anarresti society in *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin

   One of the most important aspects to consider when analyzing works from the science fiction genre is the setting in which the writers implement familiar concepts and ideas into unfamiliar realities. The setting, to some extent, can be regarded as and held with the same prenotions as a regular character, in regards to exploring the inner journey the characters embark on to uncover the many complexities and challenges presented to them in this atmosphere. The planetary twins of Anarres and Urras in Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed contrast each other in almost every aspect of life and the cultural distinctions within the two societies completely shape the foundation of each character's ideas and motivations. The existence of these two polarized civilizations mirrors that of the conflicting moralities and interests of the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War (during which the novel was written) in such an intricate fashion. The values and functions of the two societies are set in direct opposition to each other and reflect those of the two belligerent superpowers during the 20th century respectively. Urras is a society built on hierarchy and self-indulgence, one where there is a seemingly unbreakable class system in place that favors the few higher-ups than the common masses (the U.S.) To combat this structure of government, pioneers under the leadership of the celestial figure Odo (similar to Karl Marx) migrated to Urras's sister planet where they settled and established a non-governmental institution known as Anarres. The hopes and aims of this foundation was similar to that of the U.S.S.R during its establishment that stressed the need for a classless society where work and production proceeded everything else to better the lives of all its inhabitants. The values of this anarchist state are on par with those of the basic theories of communism; that all private property should be demolished along with the turmoil caused by an unwavering patriarchal culture fused with a stagnant class structure. The people of Anarres learn from the time they are infants to accept its values as the righteous course to take in life, as we see when Shevek fights with a fellow toddler for sunlight. Their matron tells them, "Nothing is yours. It is to use. It is to share. If you will not share it you cannot use it." (27) The impact this setting has on its residents is so substantial that they can't possibly imagine or accept the culture of Urras, further building the tension between the two, as was seen during the Cold War.

6. Reading Response 11/9: Cognitive Estrangement in *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin

   Working off of the focus of my reading response post last week, the setting that a science fiction writer chooses to revolve the entire story and immerse the characters into to gain introspection plays a significantly important role in the placement of science fiction theory and the meaning of cognitive estrangement to offer a social critique. Ursula K. Le Guin, in creating two fictional worlds whose cultures and governments oppose each other in almost every way, shape, and form, is appropriate in examining the distinct opinions and ideas of people and the severe impact of their upbringing and education on them. People become so attached to their perception of reality and their understanding of morality that they are prone

to rejecting any alternative options. The term cognitive estrangement can be used in association with the story's interior meaning. It places familiar concepts in an unfamiliar environment that evokes the helm of scientific and technological advancement. Le Guin uses this practice to unwrap the complexities of these two contrasting societies that fail to cooperate and accept each other and showcase the many flaws and problems present in each system of governance as a result. While this setup can be interpreted as a motif for the conflict between capitalist and communist entities during the majority of the 20th century, its meaning takes on a new light when it is placed in the environment of the societies of Urras and Anarres. The fact that these two governments literally exist on different planets adds a whole new layer of meaning in comparing the two modes of thinking; although both being together on Earth, it often felt that the capitalist west and the communist east were of two different worlds themselves. It also accomplishes the purpose of portraying the distinction between the two mindsets and how the distance between the two planets serves to alienate the two cultures from each other and further drive a wedge between them. The protagonist and his goals also present how the conflict showcases the weakness and issues of both societies. Shevek, who wishes to incorporate knowledge from both worlds to develop his General Temporal Theory to help his species no matter what ideals they hold, is taken aback and disheartened by both Urras and Anarres as neither can fully accept him for valuing ideals from both societies. Both institutions become suspicious of his intentions and try to grasp the theory from him any chance they get. If both were willing to cooperate with one another and provide the necessary resources in hopes of developing this scientific achievement for the betterment of both their societies, he would not feel so compelled to actually share his theory with the world. Le Guin does a remarkable job of incorporating authentic real-life issues into the presentation of two fictional worlds, a practice used commonly in science fiction pieces.

7. Guest Post #1: Reading Response 9/28 - Abhishek Pandey

   Abhishek's response really shines a light on the distinctions between western U.S. and eastern Soviet SF; most notably how the censorship placed on the ladder prevented it from bringing up negative subject matter(i.e. Nuclear war) and stressed the importance of portraying stories about the overcoming of hardships through socialist ideals rather then the grim material of American SF. It allows the reader to grasp a better understanding of how these works came into development contrary to one another.

   SF in Eastern Europe was also a bit subversive like American SF. Authors like Evengii Zamiatain wrote SF critiquing the revolution. VIndimir Mayakovsky wrote SF satires criticizing bureaucracy. There were an array of authors during the early years of the revolution who wrote subversive literature undermining authority. However, SF in the eastern bloc was heavily censored early on therefore these writings were produced and distributed in secret. This is referred to as samizdat (Major 80). Also due to their censorship they have an unspoken taboo on talking about nuclear war and the USSR being attacked in SF (Fritzsche 90). Usually if a story involved a nuclear attack or fallout it would take place on another planet. SF in the Eastern bloc would talk about Utopias and the country's might against obstacles.

   American SF talks about the horrors of the world and the future. With plots involving aliens, nuclear fallout, death, dystopias, etc. Russian SF does have those things in their stories. Russian SF goes more in depth about the rational nature of united humanity and how they

overcome these things. They place a greater emphasis on improvement of the human race rather than entertainment (Major 77). It was a lot more “Humanistic attitude” (Major 77). In the eastern bloc state run organizations told writers “to mirror its policies and portray the “reality” it envisioned” (Fritzsche 68). Their books were not meant to scare their readers like SF in the West. Instead it was to show the plight of the people and how they overcome hardships. These plot lines were used to portray their policies of communism in a positive light. SF in the east talked about the might of future technology. Technology such as atomic bombs, oil rigs, rockets, and more. These were used to illustrate optimism for the future and the might of the USSR.

Science fiction became more similar to American SF overtime however due to state guidelines their creativity was very limited. Early on Russian writers did criticize American literature for their very subversive text and possibly scaring people about the future. A dystopia about the current world and their country was frowned upon and was considered taboo. Whereas in Western literature authors were not scared to talk about topics to criticize the cold war. Russian SF also took some aspects of western SF such as the dark humour and satire. It became a success among readers. SF in the Soviet Union was censored which limited the author’s creativity. However, they were still able to put out works that were seen as socially conscious and unique compared to American SF.

8. Guest Post #2: Reading Response 10/19 - Devin Mongan

This response is a good analysis of one of the most perplexing and seemingly incoherent scenes in the film adaption of *Solaris* (1972); the 5-minute long highway sequence. After reading Devin’s take on it, I can grasp the significance of Tarkovsky presenting this unnerving and seemingly incessant compilation of interweaving roads and Burton’s emotionless facial expressions. The runtime, the content in the frames, the droning audio and our discomfort towards it all, is necessary for the effectiveness of examining the limits of human cognition.

(Sequence: 00:33:30 – 00:38:24)

This sequence, almost like a “guest” would in the world of Solaris, haunted me. As I rewatched it again and again for analysis, I found myself getting increasingly angry over the artistic choice to include five whole minutes of nearly silent highway footage in a movie about outer-space exploration. The only conclusion I could come to was this: scale. This sequence’s editing features back and forth inter-splicing of close-up shots of Burton (and at times, the unnamed child, who from context we can assume is Fechner’s orphaned son), first person point-of-view shots of looking at the traffic through the windshield of the car, and wide-angle overviews of the crowded highway. I think these play into my idea of this sequence establishing scale. Burton is one man, a man deeply disturbed and tortured by both what he saw on Solaris and the fact that few believe him, in a huge world. Lem, in the source text of this story, wanted to make clear that we as humans are so individualistic that we very rarely can grasp the broad. How are we to suppose that we can understand, let alone communicate with, a being so huge it spans an entire planet, when each and every day we pass thousands, if not millions of our peers, without ever acknowledging the sheer scale of humanity at large? I think this sequence is also one of the most nerve-wracking in the film, largely due to the sound, or lack thereof. Diegetically, we hear only the ambiance of the highway, fairly stock standard sounds of wheels on pavement and the gusts of wind from vehicles passing each other at high speeds. Non-diegetically though, at around the

36-minute mark, the volume slowly builds on some unintelligible background noise, something almost alien. It creates a deeply unsettling mood, and made me feel almost as on-edge as I did while reading the novel. The only way I can think to describe this sound is as a distorted whale song, but in any case, it brings to mind something not human and creates tension. Lastly, the cinematography of this sequence struck me in the way that the film continuously oscillates between being in black and white and being in color. Burton, however, is always in black and white. I think this speaks to an important theme carrying over from the novel: the limits of human cognition. We seek to understand the motivations and machinations of a vast, sentient, plasmic entity, and yet we cannot understand ourselves. I think the black and white serves as a visual indicator of this confusion and unclear-ness; while the background shots of cars and roads are completely intelligible, Burton (and the boy) are more difficult to read. Overall, though this scene was added to the film and does not originate from the source material, I think this sequence more accurately captures the intentions and mood of Lem's novel than any other part of the film.

9. Guest Post #3: Reading Response 11/2 - John D'Aquino
   John touches on a crucial aspect of SF writing that seems simple and overlooked but is actually very complex and important; the language. The way that language is used in any literary piece, not just SF, allows for the audience to better connect with the characters and interpret how their external circumstances have had an effect on their general outlook. SF gives language even more crucial tasks, as we see in *The Dispossessed* in the fictional anarchist society of Anarres that rejects the usage of possessive pronouns and shows how its unique language represents its ideals.

   As a fan of linguistics and a student of multiple languages, one of the most interesting and intriguing things in this book so far is the use of language of the Odonians, on their anarchistic, property-lacking planet. One example that stuck out most to me was the one from chapter two in which the narration explains how people are taught to not use possessive pronouns. It is interesting to me, as well as enthralling worldbuilding, that it starts with children at such a young age when they are trained to avoid words like "my", "mine", "his", or "hers". What is even more interesting is the fact that not only do they not use these words in the literal sense, they also have a place for them in figures of speech, since of course the words themselves still exist, even if the people of Anarres do not believe in the concepts. What I really don't understand though is why the words themselves are so forcefully and frequently suppressed. Picture a scenario in which two coworkers are handling some kind of job, for which they both get identical tools. If the two coworkers are grabbing the tools and one of them says "this one will be yours and this one will be mine", where lies the problem in that? We know that the people of Anarres would be more inclined to say something along the lines of "You will use this one and I will use this one", however the fact that they might use possessive pronouns to distinguish things like this doesn't actually take anything away from the structure of their society or their core beliefs. Another interesting connection between language and the structure of their society that is made is in relation to sex and relationships. I found it kind of amusing that they still shy away from the idea of using the phrase "having" sex or saying that one person "has" another. Lastly, the example that confused me the most was where they mention how if someone has an injury, they're not allowed to say "my arm hurts" because of the words "my arm". I understand that their

system is based around sharing, but how exactly can one refuse to recognize ownership over their own body? And in this scenario, do the people of Anarres even recognize the concept of a self since one must “possess” a self?