

At the beginning of the year, when looking for classes to sign up for in my first semester of college, I took advantage of the vast array of intriguing seminars offered at Binghamton that made those limited subject-oriented high school courses pale in comparison. Having chosen a fair amount that would meet my general education requirements, I came across a section titled Cold War Science Fictions. The title on its lonesome had acquired my attention and grew into ebullient curiosity as I read the course description that explained we would be analyzing numerous SF texts written during the Cold War period from both the Western and Eastern hemispheres. My only real experience with any form of science fiction prior to this course was watching reruns of the Twilight Zone with my grandfather on rainy days when I was younger and had always retained my general interest towards it. Now, after an entire semester's worth of education and development in this field, I can interpret the distinction between a weekly television program about alien abductions and other outlandish mishaps usually concluding with a twist ending and the allegorical and innovative works of Samuel Delaney, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Stanislaw Lem that embedded issues from our own society into a fictional environment. I can notice the differing characteristics between science fiction pieces and those categorized in other genres of literature; such as use of language, syntax, imagery, details, and diction. I can pick up on the many essential themes and concepts incorporated into the text and how a foreign atmosphere with highly-advanced scientific occurrences can be used as a template to convey the issues of the time in which it was written. These achievements in advanced literary analysis of science fiction was made possible by a fairly substantial amount of reading and offering my thoughts on the course texts as well as numerous literary articles designed to expand my understanding of them. Ever since the first week of class back in August, one or multiple readings, either the texts or articles, were assigned to the course webpage for our class to read and form our own opinions. Early on, for those who were unfamiliar with common science fiction terms and characteristics (me being one of them), it may have been challenging to fully grasp the information presented to us. However, as time progressed and we became adapted to and developed our understanding of the genre and its concepts, we were able to provide much more constructive and precise responses to the weekly readings as well as voice our opinions in class discussions. It became so that the assignments felt less like a burden to be completed by midnight every Sunday and more of an opportunity to express our thoughts and reactions to the content we had just absorbed in order to make them as neat and compact as they could be. When given the task of choosing out of the several accounts of reading responses I had produced throughout the entire semester, I looked for those I felt were not necessarily my most well-written pieces but which showed the most intricate and detailed regard for literary analysis of the assigned readings and science fiction in general. I chose those responses in which I believed I truly shined as a skillful writer whose fashion of conveying their ideas could break through to the reader and perhaps helped them grasp their own understanding of certain aspects of the texts as well. I also took into account the level of dedication I put into and satisfaction I got out of these responses, which often went hand in hand. If I actually enjoyed rereading the response and recounting the feelings and ideas that came to me from the assigned text, I felt it was a perfect candidate to include in this portfolio.

Now onto the actual responses at hand. The six pieces of my own creation that I chose, along with the three guest posts written by my fellow classmates (the criteria for choosing these was very similar to that of choosing my own, but with the role of writer and reader reversed),

have met the aforementioned precedents I had set for myself. The first was in response to the reading of our very first novel *The Glass Bees* by Ernst Jünger all the way back in September. While the actual novel was not one of my favorites (simply because it was short and the rest of the texts were much better in my opinion), I felt it was a good introduction to the course and acted as a nice stepping-off point for us to expand our knowledge of the science fiction genre. At this point, my knowledge on the entire scope of typical science fiction features was still very limited so I focused more on factors I already knew and could recognize. My response highlighted the life of the author and his experiences growing up in wartorn Germany (twice) during the first half of the 20th century that found its way into the backbone of the basis for the protagonist's character. What I didn't quite know initially was that this very factor is one of the most essential components of science fiction; implanting real-life dilemmas into a fictional landscape where seemingly unrealistic events are given plausibility (cognitive estrangement). The feelings of injustice done upon as a soldier by his defeated country translated well into the backstory of Captain Richard and makes us understand his desperation to find a suitable life so badly that he considers going into cahoots with a malicious businessman.

When writing the next post, I found myself examining the collective society rather than individual character arcs found in Philip K. Dick's version of Earth in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, a concept that is commonplace in science fiction. Further evolving my comprehension skills and beginning to see the bigger picture of what writers tend to do use the SF genre for, the civilization inhabiting Earth's not-so-distant future is one made up of a largely indifferent and apathetic human race. People care little for the well-being of one another, even their loved ones, and have become so robotic-like that they are very hard to distinguish from man-made androids. These circumstances are made to make the audience question the essence of humanity and how it should be defined; should we simply consider the physical manifestation of that characterizes a person or are there other factors to consider, such as our treatment of each other and ability to experience certain emotions. Within the realm of an SF dystopian future Earth, the events made plausible are only slight exaggerations of what is really going on beneath the surface of our current situation.

Another area of SF that I had come to learn over time, especially in relation to this course, was the impact of the cultures that writers hail from has on their work. In my third reading response, instead of offering my opinions on a fictional novel, I instead was informed by scholarly articles of the importance of worldly events and institutions in generating the SF genre. The content shared between the articles involved the fashion in which the Soviet Union carried out its allowance of SF publication. The very nature of the U.S.S.R. was generally very repressive, especially in any area where its ideals could be publicized to the world. For this reason, SF was generally made within the boundaries of the state's agenda and presented more positive stories where a set objective was met due to hard work and sacrifice (with rare exceptions of limited governmental criticism) rather than touching upon the dreary critiques of society found in Western SF. This specific point was made apparent to me through reading the response of one of my fellow classmates, Abhishek Pandey. Initially, I simply went over the main points of the articles and how SF was treated throughout the course of the Soviet Union's existence; first in light of the state agenda under Stalin and then more leniently during the "dethawing" age (where some criticism was tolerated). But without viewing the content of the articles from another perspective, I wouldn't have thought to connect these circumstances to the

defining characteristics of Western and Eastern SF. Both through my initial interpretation and viewing that of another peer, I have gained even more insight into the factors affecting the SF genre.

Literature was not the only medium of SF that this course went over; there were certain instances where we looked at the relevance of film in either adapting SF texts or creating new SF stories all on its own. In my fourth post, I examined the use of filmmaking techniques to deliver certain aspects of Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* in a whole new light in Andrei Tarkovsky's adaptation. I examined a sequence that explored Lem's central theme on the limits of human cognition that was taken a step further in front of the camera. The cinematography, mise-en-scène, direction, and editing of the library scene serve to increase the theme's effectiveness by feeding the audience visual and auditory cues that would coax them into analyzing the deeper meaning for themselves. The way the camera presented the landscape and cut between the characters, the items chosen to be at the forefront or background of the shots, the score and sound design used to create an ambience central to the mood of the scene; all played a role in creating a perfect template to explore man's cognitive limits and their reaction to this humbling fact. There was another scene which stood out in the cinematic interpretation that wasn't included in the novel; the 5-minute highway sequence. Here, with a fresh perspective influenced by Devin Mongan's response to it, I can interpret the scene to also connect to Lem's original theme; the creepy and foreboding atmosphere set in stone by the long, winding roads and emotionless face of Burton show us man's dreaded reaction to his cognitive limits.

Lastly, upon my last weeks of the course, I turned to examine one of the most crucial aspects of SF literature; the setting. In my fifth and sixth chosen reading responses, the central point behind the two connect each other to the larger idea of issues presented in the novel. Rehashing the central definition of cognitive estrangement, I interpreted the contrasting societies of Urras and Annares in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* to both reflect the dual ideals of the Cold War atmosphere and to interpret how the ironclad differences between the two actually stunt instead of strengthen their growth. John D'Aquino's response also brought my attention to the use of language in the novel that was distinct in portraying Anarresti customs as opposed to Urresti. He pointed out that the banning of possessive pronouns was unique to Anares and expressive of its anarchist ideals that combat those of their mass-consuming and exploitative neighbor society.

Now, at the end of the course looking back upon my progress, it is fair to say, through the evolution of my reading responses, that I have acquired an intellectual and advanced understanding of the SF genre and all that its pieces intend to accomplish.