

Technics and Galactic Capital

Instructor: David Rambo
LIT190S.01, Spring 2016
Friedl 118, W/F 3:05 – 4:20

Course Description:

“Society’s real subsumption by capital” is the phrase Karl Marx uses to designate capital’s transformation of productive forces, social systems, and cultural values to suit its intractable drive for profit. Since he wrote *Capital*, this subsumption has been more and more identified with an impetus to innovate new industries and markets, to invent new techniques, and to reconfigure the human being to the point of destabilizing its anthropological identity. In this course, we shall seek not merely to understand this logic, but above all to highlight its traces in recent novels. To that end, our guiding theme for the course is the prospect of a capitalism beyond Earth and beyond human civilization. In science fiction, this can mean capital’s subsumption of multiple worlds and alien species. Such speculative manifestations frame issues from the ecological problems of industrial expansion to the theoretical question of value, monetary or otherwise. But the adjective “galactic” is not limited to the free market’s conquest of outer space. So far as it signifies capital’s necessary extension of accumulation, galactic or post-Earth capital also has to do with a capitalist economy’s limits, the crises that occur in response to those limits, and the means by which it temporarily overcomes them. Above all, the galactic prospects of capital put into relief what it means to live in the present world market civilization by foregrounding its potential for a range of futures.

The silent figure in the notion of a galactic capitalism is that of the cyborg, a combination of the biological with the artifactual in one body. In 1960, Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline coined the term, short for “cybernetic organism,” as a theoretical fiction responding to the challenges of manned space exploration. In their scientific publication, they intended cyborg alterations as both an adaptation to extraterrestrial environments and a way to unify mind and body. One can easily apply this argument to our present, earthbound socioeconomic situation, though recent forays into commercial space flight bring the notion of the cyborg back to its genesis. With the advent of microcomputers, old industries were transformed, and new industries have emerged to exploit digital commodity markets and creative forms of labor. Financial systems are the case in point: algorithms trade assets and derivatives at subperceptual speeds beyond human control, sometimes spiraling the market into a “flash crash.” There can be no human economy without nonhuman intentional artifacts. The matrix of capitalist enterprises and the intensification of its demands arguably already present an extraterrestrial environment for which the human needs any and every technological advantage to keep up with and to advance the cycle of growth and profit. 2K Games’ *BioShock* explores the ethical and societal consequences of such a hardline with its underwater city of Rapture. Created by Andrew Ryan, who is the clear personification of Ayn Rand’s objectivist philosophy, Rapture presents a microcosm of *laissez-faire* economics and unbridled technoscientific pursuit of wealth and power. It is its own world (market), where, as Andrew Ryan says in one of his many recorded aphorisms, “In the end, all that matters to me is me, and all that matters to you is you. That is the nature of things.”

Literary speculation continues to expand the realm of the thinkable when it comes to the technoscientific mastery of nature. Our course will investigate to what extent this imagined

development manifests as part and parcel of capital's macroeconomic drives and free market ideology. When literary works focus on human ideals and human biology in conflict with alternative value systems, the role of the capitalist present can be subtle. Novels like Octavia Butler's *Dawn* and Peter Watts' *Blindsight* both incorporate techniques of absolute control over physical nature, which simultaneously saves the human race and threatens to disfigure entirely any conventional sense of humanity. At work within these stories and character explorations are characteristically capitalist themes: in *Dawn*, there is no point and no meaning to the genetic manipulation of Earth and its lifeforms without "the Trade" of genomes between humans and their alien saviors; in *Blindsight*, despite taking place in a "post-scarcity economy," those wishing to retain their humanity must combat techno-economic obsolescence through constant innovation and by submitting to a synthetic intelligent system's game-theoretical logic.

The most central text of our course, Bruce Sterling's rhetorically inventive and politically complex novel *Schismatrix*, explores in its depiction of the mastery of nature two alternative trajectories (and presently emerging traditions) of mastery over the human. These are the two competing ideologies that structure most of the human race's post-Earth civilization: the Shapers, who rely on genetic manipulation and embodied technique, and the Mechanists, who directly merge inorganic technical artifacts with their organic material selves. Given its pertinence to our course as well as the density of its setting, language, and ideas, we will spend more time on Sterling's cyberpunk space opera than any other work. We will grasp what it means to think technics and galactic capital from the perspective of a "sacred Interdict" with Earth, where some cataclysmic event, blamed on technology, occurred. In *Schismatrix* the actual usage of the term "posthuman" denotes a civilization with aliens, which begins with contact made by the mercantile species called "the Investors." Posthumanism in Sterling's universe corresponds to an expanded galactic capitalism. It occurs much later on than the start of the antagonistic history of the Shapers and Mechanists. This particular rendering of the posthuman does not transcend a biologically determined human being; rather it transcends any lingering anthropological interpretations of labor as "an exclusively human characteristic" (Marx). "Mankind's a dead issue now," says one character (Sterling 59). Life after Earth has everything to do with attaining the "financial edge," whether through "psychotech" and "reshaping" oneself or by "maintenance programs" and becoming a "wirehead" (62, 66, 163, 6).

Assignments:

Three four-page papers and a final paper of six to eight pages that develops the argument of one of the shorter papers. Prompts will be given for the three shorter papers and drafts of one to two pages will be workshopped in class. Each paper is worth 20% of the final grade, with the fifth 20% coming from class participation.

Participation is a fundamental component of seminar courses. We will discuss the assigned readings as a group in accordance with student interest and my guidance. Please come to each and every class meeting with a passage, question, or topic in mind, so that you are prepared to contribute to our collective understanding of the course themes. Should you need to miss class for an excused absence, you will need to submit a 250-word (about one page, double-spaced) response to that day's readings in order to maintain a full participation grade.

Student Standards

On the first day of class, we will remind ourselves of Duke's Community Standard. Like every classroom on campus, our seminar will be a space of scholarly integrity and intellectual

freedom. For reference, please see: <https://studentaffairs.duke.edu/conduct/about-us/duke-community-standard>.

Texts:

Please purchase copies of the novels. Note that they are listed in the order that they are assigned, in case you want to hunt around for cheaper used copies or to order some with slower shipping. In addition, I recommend that you purchase your own copy of Karl Marx's *Capital, Volume 1*. However, this (in a different translation) and many other texts are freely available at marxists.org. The rest of the readings will be made available on the class's Sakai site under "Resources."

For those interested in a clear, concise account of Marx's *Capital*, I highly recommend Michael Heinrich's *An Introduction to Karl Marx's Capital*, which covers all three volumes.

(novels)

Kim Stanley Robinson, *Red Mars* (Spectra 1993, 0553560735)

Bruce Sterling, *Schismatrix Plus* (Ace 1996, 0441003702)

Octavia Butler, *Lilith's Brood* (Grand Central Publishing 2000, 0446676101)

Note: We will read only book one, *Dawn*, of the "Xenogenesis Trilogy." However, this is cheaper than buying just *Dawn*. Also, I have this collection, and we want pages to match.

Rosaura Sanchez and Beatrice Pita, *Lunar Braceros: 2125-2148* (2009)

(theory)

Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy* (Penguin Classics 1992, 0140445684)

Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (Verso 2007, 1844675386)

David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: and the Crises of Capitalism* (Oxford University Press 2011, 0199836841)

Red Planets (Wesleyan 2009, 0819569135)

Science Fiction Studies, edited by Rob Latham (Bloomsbury 2017)

Schedule:

Week 1	Media, Marx, and Science-Fiction
1/20	Handout: Marx, <i>Capital, Volume 2</i> , pp.184-196
1/22	Darko Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition" Clynes and Kline, "Cyborgs and Space"
Week 2	Commodities and The Labor Process
1/27	Marx, <i>Capital</i> , Ch. 4
1/29	Marx, <i>Capital</i> , Ch. 7, Ch. 8

Week 3	Surviving an Alien Planet	
2/3 & 2/5	Kim Stanley Robinson, <i>Red Mars</i> (p.179 for Wednesday, and p.294 for Friday)	
Week 4	<i>Red Mars</i> , continued	
2/10 & 2/12	p.426 for Wednesday, and finish for Friday	Paper 1 Assigned
Week 5	Marx on Mars (bring <i>Red Mars</i> to class)	
2/17	David Valentine, "Exit Strategy: Profit, Cosmology, and the Future of Humans in Space" pp.204-214 from David Harvey, <i>The Enigma of Capital</i> , Ch.7, "Creative Destruction on the Land"	
2/19	Jameson, <i>Archeologies of the Future</i> , Pt.2, Ch.12: " 'If I Can Find One Good City I will Spare the Man': Realism and Utopia in Kim Stanley Robinson's <i>Mars</i> Trilogy" (pp.393-416)	Paper 1 Draft
Week 6	Automation and Accumulation	
2/22		Paper 1 Due
2/24	Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Robots and Capitalism"	
2/26	On Sakai: Marx, <i>Capital</i> , pp.447-450, Ch.15, Pt.1 (pp.492-508), pp.526-533, 544-549, 616-621, and Ch.16 (pp.643-651)	
Week 7	<i>Schismatrix</i>	
3/2	"Prologue" and Part 1 "Sundog Zones" (p.106)	
3/4	Continue Discussion of Part 1	
Week 8	<i>Schismatrix</i> , cont'd	
3/9	Part 2 "Community and Anarchy" (p.178)	
3/11	Finish <i>Schismatrix</i> , Part 3 "Moving in Clades" (p.236)	Paper 2 Assigned
SPRING	No Class on 3/16 and 3/18	

BREAK	
Week 9	Innovation and Crisis (bring <i>Schismatrix</i> to class)
3/23	David Harvey, <i>The Enigma of Capital</i> , Ch.5, “Capital Evolves” (pp.119-139) Paper 2 Draft
3/25	Nick Dyer-Witheford, “Digital labour, species-becoming and the global worker”
Week 10 Redefining the Posthuman (bring <i>Schismatrix</i> to class)	
3/28	Paper 2 Due
3/30	Steven Shaviro, “The Singularity is Here”
4/1	Start reading <i>Dawn</i> (through p.70, Pt2 Ch.4)
Week 11 Interspecies Trade	
4/6	Octavia Butler, <i>Dawn</i> (through Pt.3 Ch.7, or p.164)
4/8	Finish <i>Dawn</i> (p.248) Paper 3 Assigned
Week 12 Afrofuturism	
4/13	Charles R. Saunders, “Why Blacks Should Read (and Write) Science Fiction” Nalo Hopkinson, “Report from Planet Midnight” Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism”
4/15	Sherryl Vint, “‘Only by Experience’: Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives” Melody Jue, “Intimate Objectivity: On Nnedi Okorafor’s Oceanic Afrofuturism” Paper 3 Draft
Week 14 Resource Scarcity and Ideology	
4/18	Paper 3 Due
4/20	Rosaura Sanchez and Beatrice Pita, <i>Lunar Braceros: 2125-2148</i>
4/22	Lyse Rivera, “Future Histories and Cyborg Labor: reading borderlands science fiction after NAFTA” Bring <i>Lunar Braceros</i> to class.

4/27 Last Day Recap
Share Final Paper Progress

5/2

Final Paper Due at Noon