

## CMS.S61/CMS.S97 World-building

Thursday 2-5pm -- Room 66-144

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION:** This class concerns the design and analysis of invented (or constructed) worlds for narrative media such as tv, films, comics, and literary texts. Students will be provided with the practical, historical and critical tools by which to understand the function and structure of imagined worlds. World-building strategies in the various media and genres will be examined in order to develop our critical and creative repertoires. Participants will be asked to create their own invented worlds using the insights and techniques we have acquired in our course.

While the critical mode will be a key component of what we do in class, and will not be stinted, participants should bear in mind that at its core ours will a *creative endeavor*. The class' primary goal is to help participants create better invented worlds – ultimately all our efforts should serve that higher purpose.

In order to achieve our primary goal of building better worlds we will

- analyze exemplary instances of world-building in various narrative media in an attempt to develop a deeper understanding of successful world-building strategies
- create invented worlds of our own.
- read key interventions on world-building made by both creators and critics in an attempt to frame world-building in a larger intellectual context.
- through our various practices strive to develop a grammatica, or set of rules, that underpin successful world-building.

### PREREQUISITES:

You will need to have seen Star Wars (episode four: A New Hope) and read The Lord of the Rings by JRR Tolkien.

### COURSE MATERIAL:

Required text (available online and at MIT Coop):

*A Princess of Mars* by ER Burroughs (can be found online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/62>)

*Dracula* by Bram Stoker (can be found online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/345>)

*The Fellowship of the Ring* by JRR Tolkien

*The Terminator* by James Cameron

*Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller

*The Fades* available on Amazon Live  
*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*  
*Avatar: The Last Airbender* available on Amazon Live  
*Star Wars: A New Hope*, dir George Luca  
*The Fellowship of the Rings*, JRR Tolkien

## REQUIREMENTS:

Grades: Your final grade will derive from the following

Class Participation: 20 percent

All students must actively participate in our discussions. This is a workshop; without your participation this cannot work. You are responsible to each other as readers, advisors and critics. That responsibility includes adequately preparing and discussing all the assignments, the assigned readings, and your peers' work. It also means that you should take seriously the injunction that we are here to help and encourage our peers, not to tear any one down. Remember: do not interrupt other students. This is the first pillar of good rhetoric. Please practice it.

Worlds: 80 percent

In the course of the term students will create THREE storyworlds: narratives in which worlds play an essential role. Students will sign up for workshop time on a given day ahead of time and the week before their workshop they must distribute copies of their storyworld so that their peers will be able to review them ahead of time in order to discuss them adequately.

Students should remember to balance their world with larger narrative concerns of character, conflict, setting. The world alas is never enough. Even the worlds that are designed as settings for roleplaying and computer games must have a story of some kind spelled out that works in tandem with the world-details. A world is only as good as its story; a story is only as good as its world and it is the original (and elegant) confluence of story and world that will be foremost on my grading brain.

Discussions: We will be doing quite a bit of this in class. During our discussions show me that you have reflected on our texts and their world-building strategies.

Critiques: You will also be asked to respond to your peers' worlds in brief written critiques (about a page), typed which will be due the day we discuss their world. For the first two sets of critiques you must bring two copies of each set of comments: one copy will be given to the student whose world you're critiquing so that they may have it for their own files, and the other copy will be given to me, the instructor, so I can judge the quality of your criticism. After those two weeks you will only give your critiques to the student being discussed. Your critiques should not waste any time with pleasantries and bromides. State what works and why and what you think does not work and why and then above all build an argument as to how the world can be improved.

Peer critiques and other in-class writings will NOT count towards your page counts but they are required.

Students who show consistent initiative in our course will be granted a bonus of 5 points to their final grade.

Attendance: Attendance is required. Our class is a workshop, not a seminar — Two unexcused absences will result in a full letter grade reduction. Three late arrivals will result in one absence. Only official medical excuses will be accepted.

If you miss any work or assignments please consult your peers; this is a good way for you all to get to know each other.

Conferences: I encourage you to sign up for a conference if you have any questions about our work.

## STATEMENT ON PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism- use of another's intellectual work without acknowledgement- is a serious offense. It is the policy of the CMS Faculty that students who plagiarize will receive an F in the subject, and that the instructor will forward the case to the Committee on Discipline. Full acknowledgement for all information obtained from sources outside the classroom must be clearly stated in all written work submitted. All ideas, arguments, and direct phrasings taken from someone else's work must be identified and properly footnoted. Quotations from other sources must be clearly marked as distinct from the student's own work.

For further guidance on the proper forms of attribution, consult the style guides available in the Writing and Communication Center (12-132) and the MIT Website on Plagiarism: <http://humanistic.mit.edu/wcc/avoidingplagiarism>.

## WRITING AND COMMUNICATION CENTER

If you encounter any difficulties with your writing – from grammar to organization, even writer's block – avail yourself to the MIT Writing and Communication Center; the staff there is incredibly helpful and knowledgeable: <http://writing.mit.edu/wcc>

## TERMS

0 By **world** we mean the physical place where the story takes place—otherwise known as the **diegetic space** of the narrative.

1 By **storyworld** we mean a narrative where the world plays an indispensable role. Often used interchangeably with **world**.

2 By **mimetic world** or **consensus reality** we mean our own “real” world.

3 By **invented world** (or constructed world or secondary world) we mean an internally consistent fictional setting that varies in some degree from our real or mimetic world.

4 By **narrative media** we mean all those media that are able to tell stories. Of course we won't have time in one course to explore all medium adequately; some will certainly be starved for attention but we will do the best we can given our limited time. (For a more precise (and theoretical) discussion of narrative media see Mary-Laure Ryan's On Narrative Media:

<http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/mediumtheory/marielauryan.htm>.)

5 For what we talk about when we talk about **worldbuilding** I will quote Sara Gwenllian-Jones in her essay "Virtual Reality and Cult Television": *In the fantastic genres of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and speculative fiction, elaborate constructions of emphatically alternate realities are central narrative devices, meticulously imagined and described. In literature, the fantastic cosmologies of Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast, Ursula K. LeGuin's Hain universe, Gene Wolfe's Urth, and J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth are not merely exotic backdrops to linear narrative events but vivid and dense semantic domains that saturate character, themes, action, and plot. In addition to furnishing atmosphere and the spatial dimensions that support the narrative, they also have dynamic functions, shaping characters' experiences, inflecting plotlines, and supporting intricate networks of cross-connections through which narrative events resonate.*

5a And I will quote Marjorie Liu (writer of Astonishing X-Men comic and 17 urban fantasy and paranormal romance novels): *This is how I currently think of world building: as a total immersion, a struggle to build a reality that not only surrounds the mind of the reader, but that links directly into the emotional state of the reader. The world a writer builds can be detailed beyond belief, dazzling to look at (think of some of the computer generated set pieces in the newer Star Wars movies), but if there is no emotional resonance with that world (resonance that is built through character and plot), then ultimately it's forgettable (again, think Star Wars I, II, and III).*

*In other words, everything is there for a reason. And, because of that, a proper world has its own character...and that character is inextricably linked to the character and motives of the protagonist and antagonist.*

*The amount of world building you do is also linked to what your needs are. What do you need in order to drive the story forward? How much of the world do you show?*

*Just enough, basically. Enough to tell the story, enough to add some depth and mystery, enough to tantalize the reader into knowing there's more around the corner. I don't think that changes, whether you're writing a comic, a novel, or making a film. You never want to distract from the story. Story comes first. The world is there to enhance the story, and drive the story forward.*

5b And finally I will quote M. John Harrison: ***Every moment of a science fiction story must represent the triumph of writing over worldbuilding.*** Worldbuilding is dull. Worldbuilding

*literalizes the urge to invent. Worldbuilding gives an unnecessary permission for acts of writing (indeed, for acts of reading). Worldbuilding numbs the reader's ability to fulfill their part of the bargain, because it believes that it has to do everything around here if anything is going to get done. Above all, worldbuilding is not technically necessary. It is the great clomping foot of nerdism. It is the attempt to exhaustively survey a place that isn't there. A good writer would never try to do that, even with a place that is there. It isn't possible, & if it was the results wouldn't be readable: they would constitute not a book but the biggest library ever built, a hallowed place of dedication & lifelong study. This gives us a clue to the psychological type of the worldbuilder & the worldbuilder's victim, & makes us very afraid.*

Please be advised that the instructor may change the syllabus at any time.

## A PRIMER FOR ANALYZING STORYWORLDS

Some key points to consider when analyzing our various worlds, a checklist to help you organizing your explorations.

- What are the world's primary features—spatial, cultural, biological, fantastic, cosmological?
- What is the world's ethos (the guiding beliefs or ideals that characterize the world)?
- What genres or their echoes are present in the storyworld? Does the storyworld hew to its genre's conventions or subvert them? How?
- What are the precise strategies that are used by the creator(s) to build the world? How does the artist gain authenticity or authority?
- And how are we the viewer or reader or player connected to the world? What is our point of immersion?
- Is the protagonist the "perfect person for this perfect world?" Which is to say how does the world help focus on the problem facing our protagonists?
- Does the world have a special conceit or 'twist' that makes it unique?

## MANUSCRIPTS

When your work is up for critique, you must provide enough photocopies for the class, the instructor, and yourself, and for those peers who lose their originals). Copies must be readable, and unfortunately, you will have to bear the cost for them. If you email them of course then the cost vanishes.

— PROOFREAD CAREFULLY! Typo-ridden copy undermines a writer's credibility. Using "Spell check" is not enough — you must also proof the final printed copy. If necessary, make legible handwritten corrections to your original.

— Always keep at least one extra copy of everything you hand in. Because computers sometimes lose data, pick up viruses, etc., I urge you to keep a hard copy in addition to your e copy.

— Number your pages and you may use any font as long as we're getting roughly 250 words a page or more.

## WORKSHOP

—Be responsible. Treat your peers' work with courtesy and respect. Do not engage in personal attacks.

—Make comments directly onto the text. Note what you like and what isn't working. Rewrite sentences if you must and cross out those that can go. If a sentence is awkward or doesn't make sense, comment on it. Once you've finished marking the body of the text then proceed to write a one-page critique summarizing your insights on the piece: a collation of what works, what doesn't, how it can be improved and questions that still remain.

As a general guide: The on-page comments will usually address specific localized problems: spelling, sentence clarity, language etc. The one-page critique is traditionally used to address larger issues: characterization, conflict, context, clarity, structure etc.

—Reread each story twice *before* you come to our meeting—you never know what you might miss. Handing back a story with almost no comments on it is an insult to the writer and won't help your grade much.

## REWRITES

There will be no rewrites for our class.