Suzy Anger

English 505: Victorian Speculative Fiction

Winter, Term 2 2023-2024

Friday, 10:00-12:30

In this seminar, we will explore Victorian fiction’s fascination with imagined futures, alternate histories, and wonderful inventions. The genre of scientific romance (later, science fiction) fully emerged in the period; utopian and dystopian fiction became popular; literature by leading authors envisioned fantastic new technologies, alternative cultures, and alien lifeforms. In recent years, Victorian criticism has come to appreciate that the non-realist fiction that was once critically undervalued is central to the literary culture of the period. The revaluation of these texts has been driven largely by a shift toward interdisciplinary modes of literary criticism. Nineteenth-century speculative fictions draw on scientific, psychological, biomedical, and political ideas that emerged in and transformed nineteenth-century culture. The literary texts we will read pose questions about gender, race, colonialism, globalization, industrialism, technological progress, political and social relations, and the nature of the human. Examining the fiction’s literary and cultural contexts, we will discuss such topics as automata and the boundaries between humans and machines, science fiction’s entanglement with colonialism, new conceptions of time and space, environmental concerns and apocalypse, and imagined evolutionary developments of body and mind.

*Assignments and Other Requirements*

Seminar paper (roughly 20 pages)

Presentation (roughly 25 minutes)

Three sets of informal questions/comments on the readings

Texts will include:

Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Coming Race*

Samuel Butler, *Erewhon*

George Eliot, “The Lifted Veil” and “Shadows of the Coming Race”

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, “Sultana’s Dream”

Robert Potter, *The Germ Growers*

H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds*

Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, *Tomorrow’s Eve*

Short fiction by Rudyard Kipling, Margaret Oliphant, Grant Allen, Israel Zangwill, Elizabeth Corbett, Edward Bellamy

Selections from

Mary Gibson, ed. *Science Fiction in Colonial India*

Frederic Jameson, “Progress or Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future”?

Iwan Rhys Morus, “Looking into the Future: The Telectroscope That Wasn’t There”

Louis Chude Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*