Instructor: Chris Gortmaker
Email: cgortmaker@uchicago.edu
Class Times and Location: _____
Office Hours: _____, or by appointment

Course Description

This course explores novels about climate change alongside works of critical theory about aesthetic modernism, capitalism, and science fiction. We will investigate how climate fiction can critique capitalist modernity by imagining the ecological dimensions of its persistence or supersession. In particular, we will attend to how this literary genre can both exemplify and challenge the contentious modernist imperative to "make it new." Thus, at the same time as we study the ways in which climate fiction can render the consequences of climate change intelligible, we will also debate modernism's aesthetic, historical, and political specificity as an artistic movement.

Learning Goals

You should be able to get a few things out of this course. By the end, you will have a deeper understanding of 1. the nature of aesthetic modernism as a literary and artistic movement, 2. the nature of climate fiction as a literary genre, and 3. how an attention to modernist aesthetics can clarify the artistic and political stakes of climate fiction. You will learn or refine techniques for analyzing various forms of media, from narrative fiction to critical theory and literary criticism. These skills will be valuable in other humanities courses and may help you become a more discerning culture-consumer. No prior knowledge or experience is required. Anyone who is committed to seriously engaging with the course material will do well.

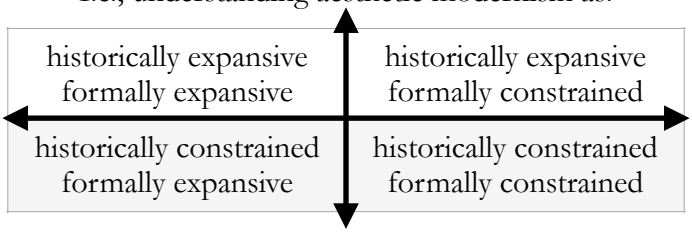
Course Overview

The course opens with a dystopian fiction, a utopian manifesto, and an expansive theory of aesthetic modernism. E.M. Forster's 1909 short story "The Machine Stops" envisions a future ravaged by ecological collapse but sustained by an all-encompassing machine. Forster's climate fiction serves as a pessimistic counterpoint to the Victorian-era radicalism exemplified by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, to which we then turn. This sweeping diagnosis of capitalist modernity's developmental trajectory forecasts a revolution that, in Forster's moment half a century

later, never arrives. Forster's portrayal suggests that the "machine" of capitalist modernity, analyzed by Marx and Engels, ultimately "stops"—but not in the way they hoped it would: climate change supersedes capitalism, and the society that emerges is a nightmarish distortion of communist ideals. Today, our world appears to be converging with Forster's climate fiction rather than with the speculative endpoint of Marx and Engels's *Manifesto*. Yet, turning to Marshall Berman, we find a rousing argument for why the latter's outlook on modernity remains vitally relevant. Berman's expansive account of aesthetic modernism understands modernist fiction as both a barometer and a form of resistance amid the "maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish… of a [modern] universe in which, as Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air.'"

With this scene-setting, we survey a Western-Marxist tradition of analyzing aesthetic modernism by tracing a recent debate. Beginning with Berman's reading of the *Manifesto*, we read Perry Anderson's critique of Berman. Then, Nathan Brown's critique of Anderson and, more broadly, of dominant approaches to "postmodernism" opens onto Nicholas Brown's reappraisal of modernist aesthetics in contemporary literature and art. Across this debate, a schema of Marxist approaches to aesthetic modernism comes into view; its axes are *history* on one hand and *form* on the other.

I.e., understanding aesthetic modernism as:



Concretizing this schema via the positions within this debate, we ask: What makes a work of art or literature modernist? What are the stakes of defining aesthetic modernism in terms of formal criteria (how works work) and historical location (when and where works are made)? How do form and history—internal intricacies of meaning and external contextual pressures—intertwine within modernist works? To bring the concerns of modernist aesthetics to bear on works of climate fiction past and present, we remain open to the possibility of modernism's historical expansiveness, with formal criteria open to debate.

Our first novel is short but deceptively complex: H.G. Wells's 1895 novella *The Time Machine*. Perhaps the most influential time-travel narrative in English, Wells's "utopian romance" (or "science fiction" *avant la lettre*) is also a prescient literary interrogation of capitalism's climatological conditions of possibility. We read Wells not only as a concretization of Darko Suvin's seminal theory of science fiction but also as a subtle embodiment of modernist formal criteria like medium specificity and aesthetic autonomy. Virginia Woolf's 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* then doubles down on these criteria, presenting a classical-modernist counterpoint to Wells's market-oriented genre fiction. Woolf herself is eager to distinguish her prose from that of Wells, and her 1925 "Modern Fiction" essay orients us to the tension between high and low culture, artwork and mere commodity, that animates modernist prose aesthetics—a tension that we analyze and complicate throughout the course. *To the Lighthouse* also organizes its innovative novelistic form around a stunning, climate-fictional core that presents a classical-modernist version of Wellsian time travel. By comparing Woolf and Wells's radically different approaches to representing the climatological dimensions of capitalist modernity's unfolding, we deepen our understanding of aesthetic modernism's formal axis.

Next, we move along modernism's historical axis, jumping, in fact, far along it: all the way to the twenty-first century. We read Jeff VanderMeer's 2014 novel *Annihilation*, Jessie Greengrass's 2021 novel *The High House*, and Ben Lerner's 2015 novel *10:04* as works of contemporary climate fiction

that reanimate formal strategies and tropes central to Wells and Woolf's modernism. We read these climate fictions as modernist fictions. Yet VanderMeer, Greengrass, and Lerner's modernism responds to the heightening commodification of literary production today (subsumed by the market, all fiction is now genre fiction) and the escalating threat of anthropogenic climate change. Thus, these contemporary climate fictions follow generic conventions in ways alien to Woolf's modernism but resonant with Wells's. At the same time, VanderMeer, Greengrass, and Lerner reshape their commitments to modernist formal criteria like aesthetic autonomy and medium specificity in light of anthropogenic climate change—a possibility that Wells, Woolf, and certainly Forster may intuit but cannot grasp with the theoretical nuance and affective urgency available today. Alongside these novels, critical essays update Marxist conceptualizations of totality along ecological lines, reappraise the politics of aesthetic autonomy in light of neoliberalism, and consider the representational challenges central to climate fiction's ambition to make vast social-ecological processes palpable.

The course concludes with Kim Stanley Robinson's sweeping 2021 novel *The Ministry for the Future*. We ask: How, at present, can aesthetic modernism be brought to bear on political-economic modernism? Eschewing the literary-formal nuance of VanderMeer, Greengrass, and Lerner, Robinson aims to present a vision of how the world ought to be. For him, this means a socialist modernity emerging from the cracks of a capitalist modernity battered by political-economic turmoil, ecological collapse, and volatile climate change. Speculatively narrating the course of global politics over the rest of the twenty-first century, this utopian novel verges on propaganda (in the neutral sense of programmatic political instrumentality) as it seeks to make a post-capitalist world thinkable amid the impending end of modernity *tout court*. To this end, his novel constellates a sprawling web of eyewitness narratives. Instrumental reportage displaces modernist formal innovation—or, we ask: Is Robinson's propogandistic novel itself a modernist innovation? Can modernist aesthetics accommodate such convergence of the political-economic and the aesthetic? That is, can a modernism of content substantively supplant a modernism of form? Looking through the eyes of politicians and refugees, scientists and teenagers, we debate such questions as we imagine, with Robinson, how capitalist modernity may soon crumble under the pressures of climate change and, through variably violent and diplomatic political struggle, transform into something better. Alongside Robinson's speculations about carbon-sequestration cryptocurrencies, melting glaciers, radicalized climate migrants, and swarming cruise missiles, we read political-economic accounts of capitalism's relationship to climate change. We ask: how can attention to modernist aesthetics clarify the artistic and political stakes of climate fiction as a literary genre?

Required Texts (note the ISBN; all other texts will be posted on Canvas as PDFs)

H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (Dover, 1995). ISBN: 978-0486284729
Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Mariner, 1989). ISBN: 978-0156907392
Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (Picador, 2024). ISBN: 978-1250824042
Jessie Greengrass, *The High House* (Scribner, 2022). ISBN: 978-1982180119
Ben Lerner, *10:04* (Picador, 2015). ISBN: 978-1250081339
Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future* (Orbit, 2021). ISBN: 978-0316300148

Policies

Reading. Read and reread. Take notes; underline and circle words and phrases; mark important passages, writing them out by hand to understand them if necessary. Essentially, be an active reader. Your commonplace book will be essential here (more on this under "Assignments" below). Plan your time. Complete the reading before each session, give yourself time to think about the texts before class, and arrive with at least a handful of points and questions for discussion. Bring

everything you have read thus far and all of your reading notes to class. NOTE: Unless needed as a disability accommodation, the use of screens—including laptops, tablets, phones, watches, augmented reality glasses, etc.—is not permitted in the classroom. I will print out PDFs and distribute them at the end of each class session. PDF readings are also available on Canvas.

Attendance, deadlines. Attendance at every class session is required; more than two unexcused absences will be grounds for failing the course. Any excuse for absence must be presented in writing before the next meeting of the class. Assignment due dates are provided on the syllabus so that you can plan your work for the semester. Extensions on writing assignments will be available but must be requested as far in advance as possible; failure to request an extension ahead of time may result in its denial. Late assignments will be docked half a letter grade each day they are late.

Academic honesty. I look forward to reading your work, which is to say, engaging with the ideas that you will write out to the best of your ability by drawing on what you have read and your own reasoning. Presenting ideas or phrases produced by other people or algorithms as if they are your own is plagiarism. Thus, when you use the work of other people, cite it correctly and consistently in MLA or Chicago style. It is crucial that you are familiar with these standards, and it is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with them. If these standards are in any way unclear to you, please consult with me and/or your Writing Specialist. Academic dishonesty is a very serious offense, even if it is unintentional. Any form of academic dishonesty may result in immediate failure of this course and disciplinary action.

AI policy. The use of generative artificial intelligence (e.g., ChatGPT, Bard, Grammarly AI features, etc.) is prohibited on all writing assignments. Struggling to compose a clear and insightful phrase, sentence, or paragraph is how we learn to think critically through writing. Outsourcing this process to an algorithm short-circuits this process and produces inane critical prose, wasting both your time and mine. Your thoughts matter. Don't throw them into an algorithmic blender. I expect you to practice critical writing in all its thrilling difficulty. If English is an additional language for you, you might consider the resources available at UChicago's English Language Institute, https://esl.uchicago.edu/.

Accessibility and Student Disability Services (SDS). I am committed to doing whatever I can to make the course and its materials accessible. Students with disabilities who have been approved for the use of particular academic accommodations by SDS and need reasonable accommodation(s) to participate fully in this course should follow the procedures established by SDS. You can contact SDS by email (disabilities@uchicago.edu), by phone (773-702-6000), and via its website (disabilities.uchicago.edu).

Mental Health and Wellness. College life can be extremely stressful, and I recognize that the transition to college poses challenges for all students. Remember that you have in place a network of people who are ready and willing to help. Your College Advisor, your Resident Heads and Resident Assistants, and the staff at Student Counseling are available to you should you need or want to talk. You can find a description of services at wellness.uchicago.edu/mental-health.

Assignments and Evaluation

Essays. You will write two for this course. I will share prompts for these essays on Canvas well in advance of their submission deadlines.

Grade breakdown

Informed participation in class - 15%
Weekly commonplace book entries - 15%

Automatic Writing Experiment, 2-3 pages, due _____ 1/13 - 10%
First essay - 4-5 pages, due Sunday 1/29, revision encouraged - 20%
Final essay prospectus presentation, 1-2 pages, due _____ - 10%
Final essay (with two drafting exercises) - 5-7 pages, due _____ - 30%

Participation. This course is a seminar: we succeed or fail collectively. Arrive at each of our class sessions ready to talk and ready to listen. If a text excites you, talk about why. If something confuses you, ask questions. If you agree with comments someone makes, elaborate on your agreement for the class. If you disagree with someone, explain why. In short, contribute to our common intellectual enterprise. I evaluate participation in terms of quality rather than quantity. To explore questions and ideas you develop in your reading and in our class discussions, I encourage you to attend my office hours or email me to find other times. Even if your question or idea feels inchoate, don't hesitate to come by or get in touch. Similarly, if you feel that you're struggling to participate, for whatever reason, let me know. We will find ways for you to contribute. Let's think together.

Commonplace book. You will create this dynamic book of quotations, annotations, questions, observations, diagrams, drawings, etc., over the course of the quarter. You must use a physical notebook and write by hand, unless you require other accommodations. Throughout the quarter, you must write at least nine entries in your commonplace book as a way to organize your thinking. Each entry must incorporate these five components:

1. *Copy out* one substantial passage from the week's reading that is intriguing or confounding or related to broader questions/themes explored within the course. You'll be reading by hand, so to speak. This practice should train your attention on things like syntax, rhythm, diction. Focus on what resonates with your particular interests. Good choices will be moments in the text that you feel helpfully illuminate the larger argument or point, that raise questions for you on a first read and that you think you'd like to spend more time with, or ones that you simply find difficult, even confounding. Occasionally, you may also feel drawn to a passage that is beautiful or moving! Be sure to note the title of the work and the page number of the passage you've chosen.
2. *Annotate* this handwritten text, identifying important terms or themes, pulling out memorable turns of phrase or strategies of argument or description, commenting on the text through a process of explication and unpacking (the Latin root *explicare* means "to unfold"). Feel free to color-code, draw pictures/diagrams/lines, or use other creative annotations. Week to week, I will also do my best to print out images so that you can mark them up. Get creative!
3. Include one to two interesting *questions* you have about the material.
4. In two to three bullet points, note your *observations* about the passage.
5. Note the *key term(s)* of the reading and define it/them in your own words. E.g., "science fiction," "metabolic rift," "aesthetic autonomy," etc.

Once per week, you must upload a fully readable photo of an entry written that week to Canvas using the submission pages under the "Assignments" tab. Thus, you will upload nine entries throughout the quarter—no make-ups will be granted. Entries will not only help you write essays; more immediately, they will help you prepare for class discussion, and you should have your commonplace book ready at hand in class. Finally, and crucially, your commonplace book should not be the only form of notes you take for this class—it is meant to lend structure to your note-taking, which, in one form or another, should accompany any reading you do for this course. You might think of your commonplace book as the place you turn, beyond your usual notebook or notes document, when you are particularly struck by a passage and want to dig deeper. You might find yourself writing an entry several times a week, or you might just write the nine that are required. Figure out what works best for you.

Essay Writing. Apart from your commonplace book and other notes you take, *all* of the writing you do for credit in this course must be *directly performed* in the Google Doc found under the Collaborations tab in Canvas. This includes essays and short assignments that you will complete in conjunction with your reading. The latter may include brief responses to questions, close reading of a sentence or image, outlining an argument, and so on. NOTE: You may *not* copy/paste external writing into your Google Doc. If you are found to have done so (found, that is, via the Google Doc's revision history) the writing in question will, by default, be considered generative AI-use and will not be evaluated for credit. On a case-by-case basis, instances of suspected generative AI-use may lead to an entire re-write, a grade penalty, or more serious consequences. In essence, localizing your writing in this way is the best means I've yet found of ensuring that I am able to engage with your writing—your *thinking*—and not that of probabilistic machine. Google Docs also facilitates dynamic and detailed forms of writerly collaboration and feedback.

Formatting. All essays should be formatted in 12-point, double-spaced Times New Roman font, with a header (assignment name, submission date), a title, and footnoted citations in Chicago or MLA style (no need for a bibliography). Each assignment should begin as a new section within your Google Doc and the title of each assignment should be formatted as a heading (this produces a useful table of contents).

Submitting. To submit your assignment, email me before 11:59pm on the date that it is due, then make no further edits to your Google Doc. If you email me at 12:30am that next morning, that is OK. 4am is pushing it. Plan ahead and don't lose sleep. Any late changes to the assignment will be deleted because I will revert the document back to its original form at submission.

Schedule of Readings:

Week 1 - Introduction, Theorizing Modernism I

- E.M. Forster, "The Machine Stops"
- Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifesto* [11 dense pages]; Marshall Berman, "Introduction," *All That is Solid Melts into Air* [21 dense pages]

Week 2 - Theorizing Modernism II

- Excerpt - Berman, Chapter 1, *All That is Solid Melts into Air* [41 dense pages]; Perry Anderson, "Modernity and Revolution" [18 dense pages],
- Nathan Brown, "Postmodernity, Not Yet" [15 dense pages]; excerpt - Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism* [43 dense pages]

Week 3 - Wells

- H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* [76 pages]
- Excerpt - Darko Suvin, Chapters 1 and 4, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* [33 dense pages]; Gortmaker, "Market Texture: The Art of Genre Fiction"

Week 4 - Woolf

- Woolf, "Modern Fiction" [7 dense pages]
- Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* [209 pages]

Week 5 - VanderMeer

- Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (2014) [208 pages]
- Brent Ryan Bellamy, "Ecology with Totality."

Week 6 - Greengrass

- Jessie Greengrass, *The High House* (2021) [270 pages]
- Excerpt - Amitov Ghosh*, The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), 24.

Week 7 - Lerner

- Ben Lerner, *10:04: A Novel*
- Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses,"
- Excerpt from Jennifer Ashton, "Totaling the Damage: Revolutionary Ambition in Recent American Poetry"

Week 8/9 - Robinson

- Excerpts - Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future* (Orbit, 2020)
- Fredric Jameson, "Progress versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?," *Science Fiction Studies* 9, no. 2 (1982)
- Excerpt - John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (2000)
- Excerpt - John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth* (2011)
- Excerpt - Matthew T. Huber, *Climate Change as Class War: Building Socialism on a Warming Planet* (2022).