Authors writing in the Science Fiction/Speculative Fiction (SF) genre have long explored political themes—such as the rise and decline of empires, the impact of technological change on individual liberty, the nature of revolutionary struggles, the workings of totalitarianism, and the impact of socio-political collapse on humankind.

This seminar approaches SF as social-scientific and social-theoretic text. Subjects include the politics of contact, alterity, identity, and warfare. Readings include SF novels, as well as scholarly texts on politics and social science. Students are also expected to watch and discuss films and videos.

This is not a literature course. We do not explore (much) the emergence of SF, its conventions, or its history; we do not read literary criticism of SF or cognate genres. Instead, we approach SF as many of its authors intend: as an opportunity for ontological displacement and a landscape of the imaginary that allows us to contemplate contemporary socio-political concerns.

Requirements and Policies

Readings and Class Participation. Although I will occasionally give short lectures, the class is taught primarily as a seminar. Students are required to contribute to the intellectual and educational life of the class via participation in class discussions and small-group exercises. I expect students to complete all of the readings most of the time, and at least most of the readings all of the time.

Class participation takes two forms. Together, they total 25 percent of your final grade. The first is engagement in in-class discussions. The second is online engagement through the equivalent of interactive reading journals.
You are required to write at least two short (150 words or less) posts for each week of the class, excluding the week of September 1. These should involve informal reactions to the material, ideas for class discussion, additional ruminations on ongoing issues or themes, etc.

The first post must be logged between 12.00pm Sunday and 12.00pm on Monday of each week. The second between 12.00pm on Tuesday and 8.00pm on Wednesday.

You are also required to comment on at least two of your classmates posts over the course of the week. The first comment must be on a post logged between 12.00pm Sunday and 12.00pm Monday, and must itself appear by 8pm of that Monday. The second can occur at any subsequent time.

You are exempt from the online component during the two weeks that you hand in your short essays.

These are minimum requirements for passing. Completion of them does not entitle you to an A for this component of the class participation grade.

Writing Requirements.

1. Two short (750-1250 word) essays comparing and contrasting two assigned and/or recommended fictional works in terms of their treatment of a particular political issue. These essays are due on two of the following dates: 30 September, 14 October, 28 October, and 11 November. The week you turn in an essay you are exempt from the online component of class participation. Although the primary source material for the essays are the works considered, you are expected to supplement that material with relevant social-scientific, social-theoretic, and political-theoretic articles. For example, an analysis of militarism in Ender’s Game and Starship Troopers should draw on academic discussions of militarism and cite them accordingly. In general, your topics should not mirror specific “suggested issues,” although some of those are so broad that I’ll accept essays on them. You should discuss your topic with me ahead of time (in person, over email, or via skype). Together, these total 35 percent of your grade.

2. One final paper (3000-5000 words), which is due on 14 December at 11.59pm (via email; please provide a hard copy in my box by 5pm 15 December). You should begin discussing the nature of your essay with me as soon as possible. In general, you should write on the politics-SF nexus with respect to either works we’ve examined or works you would like to examine. The same stipulations viz. outside sources on the short papers apply to the long papers, but while the short
papers only require brief supplements, the long paper requires more significant research on these topics and commensurate citation of supporting materials. Sample topics include: an analysis of Dune in terms of COIN (counter-insurgency) doctrine; the post-apartheid politics of recent South African speculative fiction; and representations of genocide in speculative fiction. The final paper is worth 40 percent of your grade.

General Policies.

- You are bound by Georgetown’s honor code. Plagiarism or other instances of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. I put all writing assignments through “turnitin.”
- Our classroom is outfitted with multiple SMART boards and computers. Students should be prepared to volunteer to operate those computers for the purpose of enhancing class discussion with online materials.

Learning Goals.

- Improved analytic writing skills;
- Better understanding of key political themes addressed in the course; and
- Greater facility at analyzing fictional material in terms of political, political-theoretic, and social-theoretic issues.

Notes on the Readings.

- All required books are available from the bookstore or online.
- Unless hyperlinked, recommended texts must generally be acquired via a student’s own recognizance.
- Recommended texts marked with two asterisks (**) are highly recommended.
- Most of the films and videos are available online via streaming services (e.g., Amazon, Netflix, Hulu) or from the library.

** Provide explanation of supplementary readings and how to approach them.

Schedule

1 September No Class – Introductory Issues Handled Electronically

SF, Popular Culture, and Politics
6 September  


Watch:  
Star Trek: The Next Generation: “The Outcast” (Season 5, Episode 17)

Suggested Issue(s): Consider “The Outcast” from each of the four approaches discussed in Neumann and Nexon.

Recommended
• Daniel Drezner, Theories of International Politics and Zombies. (**If you need a refresher on IR theory, and want to see it applied to SF settings)
• Edward James, Science Fiction in the 20th Century, pp. 12-53. ONLINE (**If you need historical background on SF as a genre)

Games and Empire, I

8 September  
Collins, The Hunger Games, Chapters 1-10


Suggested Issue(s): Is Panem an effective empire? What is your take on Collins’ post-apocalyptic scenario?

13 September  
Collins, The Hunger Games, Chapters 11-27.

Suggested Issue(s): Can political agents escape pre-defined roles and narratives? Is the reader complicit in the Games?

Recommended
• Stephen King, The Running Man
- Richard Connell, “The Most Dangerous Game”
- Franklin Foer, How Soccer Explains the World
- Andrei S. Markovits, Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism

Games and Empire, II

15 September  
Banks, The Player of Games, Parts 1-2

Suggested Issue(s): Which society is more like our own? Is the Culture a plausible post-scarcity society?

20 September  
Banks, The Player of Games, Parts 3-4


Suggested Issue(s): What is the relationship between games and politics, e.g., is politics (international or domestic) a game? Does language structure the conditions of possibility of political action? If so, to what extent?

Watch:  Begin watching Battlestar Galactica (2003, Miniseries)

Recommended

- Iain M. Banks, “Notes on the Culture”**
- Iain M. Banks, Use of Weapons (and the rest of the Culture series)
- Ken MacLeod, Cosmonaut Keep, Dark Light, and Engine City
- Robert Charles Wilson, Spin

Near-Future Cyber-states

** Remember: if you don’t know what something means, then look it up on the internet. Halting State is full of jargon, much of which refers to actually existing or in-progress technologies.**

22 September  
Stross, Halting State, Prologue – Elaine: Alone in the Dome

Vernor Vinge, “Technological Singularity”
Suggested Issue(s): What’s the deal with this second-person narrative? Is this a plausible extrapolation of current trends? What is “the singularity” and does it make sense? Does Stross describe a post-singularity society?

27 September  Stross, Halting State, Sue: Pigs in a China Shop—End Plato, The Republic, Book VII (514-517b)

Suggested Issue(s): What is the distinction between the virtual and the real, particularly in an internet age? Will privacy be possible in the near future? Whence international politics in a “cyber” age?

Watch: Continue watching Battlestar Galactica (2003, Miniseries)

Recommended (see also Snow Crash)

- William Gibson, Neuromancer (etc.)
- Film: The Matrix
- Vernor Vinge, A Fire Upon the Deep

Guardianship and the Long Twentieth Century

29 September  Moore, Watchmen, Chapters 1-6

Suggested Issue(s): Play ‘find the watchmen’: identify, note, and analyze the visual and textual invocations of watchmen. Would the world be better off with superheroes?

4 October  Moore, Watchmen, Chapters 7-12

Suggested Issue(s): Play ‘find the watchmen’: identify, note, and analyze the visual and textual invocations of watchmen. Is Ozymandius right?

Watch: Finish Watching Battlestar Galactica (2003, Miniseries)

Recommended

- Film: The Dark Knight
- Joss Weedon, The Astonishing X-Men Omnibus
- Alan Moore, V for Vendetta (etc.)
States of Exception

6 October  Schmitt, Political Theology
Watch:  Battlestar Galactica, “33” (Season 1, Episode 1)

Suggested Issue(s): Where does sovereignty reside in BSG? What happens to societies that live in a constant state of exception? Compare and contrast BSG and Watchmen, especially in light of Schmitt’s analysis of liberalism as oppositional to democracy.

Bug-Eyed Aliens, I

11 October  Heinlein, Starship Troopers

Suggested Issue(s): Does Heinlein describe a “Garrison State?”

13 October  Heinlein, Starship Troopers
Plato, The Republic, 412-414b

Suggested Issue(s): Does Heinlein’s political system produce guardians? Is it just? How do Heinlein’s “bugs” compare to the Borg as existential threats? How does evolution and social stasis factor into the equation?

Recommended

- Joe Haldeman, The Forever War
- John Scalzi, Old Man’s War
- Robert Heinlein, Space Cadet

Bug-Eyed Aliens, II
18 October  Card, Ender’s Game

Suggested Issue(s): Starship Troopers vs. Ender’s Game. Politics, war, and games.

20 October Card, Ender’s Game

Suggested Issue(s): Starship Troopers vs. Ender’s Game. Networked politics and communication.

Watch: Start Watching Avatar

Recommended

- Orson Card’s seemingly endless “Enderverse” novels (Speaker for the Dead is, however, well worth your time)
- Vernor Vinge, A Deepness in the Sky

Imperialism and the Problem of the Other, I

25 October  Todorov, Conquest of America

Suggested Issue(s): What kind of a narrative of “the other” is Avatar? How do other texts and films we’ve looked at define, conceptualize, and represent “the other”?

Watch: Finish Watching Avatar

Recommended

- Video: Star Trek: TNG, “Darmok” (Season 5, Episode 2)**
- Film: The Emerald Forest
- Video: South Park, “Dances with Smurfs” (Season 13, Episode 13).
- Video: Farscape, “I, E.T.” (Season 1, Episode 2)
- Mary Doria Russell, The Sparrow and Children of God

Imperialism and the Problem of the Other, II

27 October  Wolfe, Fifth Head of Cerberus, Part 1
Suggested Issue(s): What kind of a future is this? What is the role of forgetting in (political) identity?

1 November
Wolfe, *Fifth Head of Cerberus*, Parts 2-3

Suggested Issue(s): Compare understandings of the “other” and the treatment of genocide with that of past readings. How do Parts 2 & 3 change your assessment of Part 1? How does Part 3 change your assessment of Part 2? What the heck is going on?

**Recommended**

- **Do not read any online analysis of the *Fifth Head of Cerberus* until finished with the book. After that, you’ll probably get a lot out of doing so.**
- China Miéville *Embassytown*
- Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Word for World is Forest*

**Libertopia and Virtual Worlds**

3 November
Stephanson, *Snow Crash*, Chapters 1-32


**ONLINE**

Suggested Issue(s): What replaces the state after its dissolution? Comparison of Stephanson fantastic virtual world(s) with Stross’ “harder SF” in *Halting State*. Games and rules.

8 November
Stephanson, *Snow Crash*, Chapters 33-71

Suggested Issue(s): Information, scripting, religion, and control. The politics (and ethics) of bureaucracy. The role of the state versus the role of the market viz. rights, the allocation of resources, and justice.

**Recommended**

- Peter Watts, *Blindsight*
- Film: *Summer Wars*
Religion, Resource Scarcity, and Empire

10 November  Hebert, Dune, Book I

Machiavelli, The Prince, Chapters V-VII, XVII, XIX. XXV

Suggested Issue(s): Evaluate Book I in terms of Machiavelli’s arguments.

15 November  NO CLASS

17 November  Hebert, Dune, Books II-III


Suggested Issue(s): Evaluate Books II and III in terms of Weber’s arguments about charisma. Is Iraq Arrakis? How does Herbert’s account of empire track with previous examples?

Politics in Extremis

22 November  Cherryh, Downbelow Station

Suggested Issue(s): The world of Downbelow Station. The social, cultural, and political impact of space travel.

Video: Firefly, “Serenity” (Season 1, Episodes 1-2)

24 November  NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)

29 November  Cherryh, Downbelow Station

Suggested Issue(s): State-formation in space. Politics under extreme conditions (cf. BSG, Starship Troopers, etc.). What endows actors with legitimate authority?

Recommended

• CJ Cherryh, the Alliance-Union books
Marx and Smith for Aliens

1 December  Le Guin, The Dispossessed

Suggested Issue(s): Scarcity and Post-Scarcity “Utopias.” The question of language and socio-political relations revisited.

6 December  Le Guin, The Dispossessed

Suggested Issue(s): Cold War via SF (cf. Watchmen, Ender’s Game). Capitalism. What makes a society just?