

Government 310
Department Seminar
Interstellar Relations: The Politics of Speculative Fiction
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9.30-10.45, ICC 216

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Spring 2013

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.

This course is a *Doyle Seminar*, part of the “Doyle Engaging Difference Program,” a new campus-wide curricular initiative, that gives faculty the opportunity to enhance the student research component of upper-level seminars that address questions of national, social, cultural, religious, moral, and other forms of difference. The Doyle seminars are intended to deepen student learning about diversity and difference through enhanced research opportunities, interaction with thought leaders, and dialogue with the Georgetown community and beyond.

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 with the peer-review component discussed below, they total 35 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.

The Online Component. You are required to write at least two short (150 words or less) posts for each week of the class, excluding the week of January 10. 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.

Also, please reference (and link to) your colleagues' posts when appropriate.

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: **3 February, 10 February, 17 February, 24 February, 3 March, 10 March, and 17 March.** 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 25 percent of your grade.

2. One final paper (4-5k words), which is due on 10 May at 11.59pm. 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.

Detailed Final Paper Procedures

Because we have been designated a "Doyle Seminar," your paper-writing process has a significant peer-review component. As noted above, this component is part of your participation grade.

1. The week of **18 February** you, your blogmates, and I will meet to discuss paper topics. You will post a short—no more than one *brief* paragraph—idea for a paper on your blog as part of [a page](#). You must do so at least 24-hours before our meeting. We will meet for 30 minutes on Google Hangout to discuss your paper ideas. For the rest of the semester, the page will serve as a location for you to keep a record of ideas, sources, and resources (your peers can contribute in comments).
2. I will be at a conference the week after Easter Break (2-5 April), so we will not have class. Instead, you will provide first drafts of your papers to a small group of colleagues and meet on Google Hangout to provide feedback. You will record your session and upload it to Youtube ([info](#)). Upon completion, you *must* set the privacy on the recording(s) to "unlisted" immediately after you are done. Next, [email me](#) the link(s) and I will watch them soonest possible. We will go over all of this when we get closer to the zero hour.

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 plagiarism-detection software.
- The subject line of emails to me should begin with "Gov 310." This will ensure that they are automatically flagged and make it much less likely that I will miss them.

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.

- Most required books are available from the bookstore; all are available 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.

Schedule

10 January Introduction and Procedures. Short discussion.

SF, Popular Culture, and Politics

15 January Jutta Weldes, "[Popular Culture, Science Fiction, and World Politics: Exploring Intertextual Relations](#)," in Weldes, ed. [To Seek Out New Worlds: Exploring Links between Science Fiction and World Politics](#), pp. 1-27.^{ONLINE}

Iver B. Neumann and Daniel H. Nexon, "[Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics](#)," in Nexon and Neumann, eds. [Harry Potter and International Relations](#), pp. 1-25.^{ONLINE}

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

17 January Collins, *The Hunger Games*, Chapters 1-10

Musgrave, Paul and Daniel Nexon. "[States of Empire: Liberal Ordering and Imperial Relations](#)" forthcoming in Dunne et al., *Liberalism and World Order*. ONLINE

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

22 January 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

- Susan Birrell, "Sport as Ritual: Interpretations from Durkheim to Goffman." *Social Forces* 60,2 (December 1981): 354-376. [JSTOR](#)
- 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

24 January 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?

29 January Banks, *The Player of Games*, Parts 3-4

Fierke, K.M. "Links Across the Abyss: Language and Logic in International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 46 (2002): 331-354. [JSTOR](#)

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.**

31 January 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?

5 February 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

7 February 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?

12 February Moore, Watchmen, Chapters 7-12
Plato, The Republic, [412-414c](#)

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

14 February Schmitt, Political Theology, Chapters 1-2^{ONLINE}
Schmitt, Concept of the Political.

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

19 February Heinlein, Starship Troopers, Chapter 1-9
Harold D. Lasswell, "The Garrison State," *The American Journal of Sociology* 14,4 (December 1943): 627-650. [\[JSTOR\]](#)

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

Watch: *Star Trek: TNG*, “The Best of Both Worlds, Part I”

21 February Heinlein, Starship Troopers, finish.

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?

Watch: *Star Trek: TNG*, “The Best of Both Worlds, Part II”

Recommended

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

Bug-Eyed Aliens, II

26 February Card, Ender’s Game, Intro-Chapter 9.

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

28 February Card, Ender’s Game, finish.

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

Recommended

- Gwyneth Jones, “[Wild Hearts in Uniform: The Romance of Militarism in Popular SF](#)” (Originally published in "Fictions" Studi sulla narativita Anno III 2004)
- Orson Card’s seemingly endless “[Enderverse](#)” novels (Speaker for the Dead is, however, well worth your time)
- Vernor Vinge, A Deepness in the Sky

SPRING BREAK 4-8 March.

Take Vn with you, because it is very, very long. You might also start watching Avatar over the break.

12 March Ashby, Vn
Wikipedia entry on Asimov's "[Three Laws of Robotics](#)" and PW
Singer, "[Asimov's Laws of Robotics are Total BS.](#)"

Suggested Issue(s): Android Allegories: Commodification, Race, Class; [Cyborg](#)
[Feminism](#); the politics of Self and Other.

Watch: Start Watching *Avatar*

Recommended

- Films/Videos: *Ghost in the Shell 2.0*, *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*, *Ghost in the Shell: Innocence*, *Ghost in the Shell: S.A.C. 2nd GIG*, *Ghost in the Shell: Solid State Society*

Imperialism and the Problem of the Other, I

14 March 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
- Peter Watts, Blindsight

Imperialism and the Problem of the Other, II

19 March 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?

21 March Wolfe, Fifth Head of Cerberus, Parts 2-3

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

Religion and Empire

16 April Hebert, Dune, Book I

Machiavelli, The Prince, Chapters V-VII, XVII, XIX. XXV-XXVI^{ONLINE (VARIOUS LOCATIONS)}

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

18 April Hebert, Dune, Books II-III

Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Vol. II, pp. [212-216](#) and [241-245](#).^{ONLINE}

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

Marx and Smith for Aliens

23 April Le Guin, The Dispossessed

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

25 April Le Guin, The Dispossessed

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