

STSO 4962: Human Futures

T/F: 10:00-11:50 AM

Russell Sage Laboratory 3705

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Individual Student Meeting Times: By Appointment T, W, F: 9-10 and 2-3

Course Overview

The future hasn't always been of such intense interest to societies. What, over the last century, has intensified this interest, and how does this interest map onto specific social concerns? In this course, we take a long view of concern about the future – as threat, opportunity, and crisis – to consider the moments in which specific futures have become salient for large numbers of people. In so doing, we focus on philosophy, social science, and literature (especially science fiction) as they operate in speculative idioms – or attempt to capture other people's speculative moments. This takes us through particular historical moments in the U.S. and North Atlantic (especially Western Europe) to think about forces like industrialization and deindustrialization, colonialism and decolonial movements, and modernization, development, and indigenous rights movements. Taken together, they help to show how concerns about the future enable and limit particular kinds of social formations, alliance building, and political organization.

The future as a concept has extreme elasticity – with a society, across societies, and as a thing in itself. As a result, we might reasonably ask: how do cultural expectations of the future shape scientific, political, and philosophical pursuits? To this end, this course takes a largely historical approach, situating the study of the future as a problem in the late 19th, 20th, and early 21st centuries as new futures are being elaborated – and, in many cases, debilitated.

This course takes an interdisciplinary social science approach to the contemporary interest in the future, and, in so doing, draws on material from literature, anthropology, sociology, and history. In addition, it integrates a variety of important thinkers from many disciplines, as they have significantly shaped understandings of the future. Across this diverse literature, students will be exposed to a variety of methods that scholars and writers have employed to understand the relationship between the future and the social contexts in which that particular future becomes salient.

Students will be expected to develop writing projects that integrate approaches across the arts, sciences, and humanities, and which draw upon the historical and cross-cultural record. Students should complete the course with a significant piece of writing that builds upon their expertise developed in the course.

Reading List:

Books are available at the campus bookstore. All other readings are available through LMS. Films must be bought or rented and viewed at home prior to class.

Bear, Greg

1985 Blood Music. New York: Arbor House.

Butler, Octavia

2000 Parable of the Sower. New York: Grand Central Publishing.

Clark, John Lee

2023 Touching the Future: A Manifesto in Essays. New York: WW Norton.

DeConnick, Kelly Sue and Valentine De Landro

2015 Bitch Planet, Vol.1: Extraordinary Machine. La Jolla, CA: Image.

Dillon, Grace

2012 Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press.

Jones, Stephen Graham.

2008 The Bird is Gone: A Manifesto. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.

Kolbert, Elizabeth

2014 The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History. New York: Henry Holt.

Le Guin, Ursula.

1994 The Dispossessed. New York: HarperCollins.

Lenin, Vladimir Ilich.

1992 The State and Revolution. Translated by Robert Service. New York: Penguin.

Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels

1998 The Communist Manifesto. New York: Verso.

O'Brien, M.E. and Eman Abdelhadi

2022 Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052-2072. Brooklyn, NY: Common Notions.

Rucka, Greg and Michael Lark.

2013 Lazarus vol. 2. La Jolla, CA: Image.

Solomon, Rivers

2019 The Deep. New York: Saga Press.

Vonnegut, Kurt

1999 Player Piano. New York, Dial Press.

X, Malcolm

1992 By Any Means Necessary. New York: Pathfinder Press.

Films

Blue Collar, Paul Schrader (1978)

Black Panther, Ryan Coogler (2018)

The Prison in 12 Landscapes, Brett Story (2016)

Elysium, Neill Blomkamp (2013)

Learning Outcomes:

Students will

1. Demonstrate understanding of course content through formal academic writing;
2. Construct effective prose that demonstrates critical thinking and advances sound conclusions, appropriate to the course and discipline; and
3. Demonstrate the ability to revise and improve their writing in both form and content.

Grading & Assignments:

All education research supports that regular, steady work helps students develop the skills needed to succeed in their educational programs. This runs counter to ideas about innate skill and aptitude. Instead, practice is the goal. This course is designed to help you practice critical reading, research, and writing skills.

Reading Guides (50%; 2 points each) – Students are encouraged to complete at least 2 reading guides each week during weeks 2-14, and a total of 25 reading guides over the course of the semester (there are more readings [~37] than required Reading Guides, so students have some latitude in which readings and films they submit Guides for).

Reading Guides must be turned in to the instructor at the beginning of class in which the reading or film is discussed. Late Reading Guides will not be accepted for credit. Reading Guides are included as Appendix A (for non-fiction), B (for fiction), C (documentary). Students will be asked to read from their Guides in class each meeting; you must have your Guides on hand to discuss them during class to receive full credit. Please consult the examples of Guides available on myCourses.

Please note: You do not need to complete all of the readings & viewings to receive a passing grade in this course. The syllabus is designed to allow for student choice and to facilitate your interests. This means that you can skip individual readings or whole weeks' worth of content. But this also means that you need to plan appropriately. DO NOT wait until there are only the required number of Guides remaining; life events happen and if you regularly turn in Guides, you will have a buffer in case anything comes up.

15-Page Final Paper, broken into these components (50% total):

Identify an Object (5%) – Based on the readings during the first month of class, identify an object that was or is considered futuristic. This might be an object you can identify in popular media, historical literature, or modern science. It should be a real thing, i.e. not something only in fiction, and there should be enough material about it to base a paper on it. In 300 words, what is the object, and what are its futuristic promises? That is, who

is this object for and what will it solve? How does the object relate to the course content?

Identify Resources (5%) – What kinds of research are you going to conduct to explore the history and actual or potential ramifications of the object you have identified? We'll discuss a number of methods in course (ethnography, textual analysis, historiography), and you'll need to choose one or two to frame your research. You'll need to identify the resources that will lead to the successful completion of your research project: are there experts you can talk to? books and academic journals you can consult? archives that you can access? In 300 words, you'll need to discuss your proposed methods in completing your research project's data collection, what secondary and primary sources you can consult, and how these sources will inform your research.

Thesis & Argumentation (5%) – In a paragraph (~200 words), make an interpretive argument about your research findings. Are you making an historical argument? an ethnographic one? a cross-cultural one? How does the argument relate to the resources you will be drawing upon to make your argument? In another paragraph, discuss the contrary positions to your argument; that is, argue against yourself. What are the weaknesses in your argument? How might other people read the same evidence differently than you propose to? How have other people argued about similar evidence in the past?

First Five Pages (5%) – Write the first five pages of your research paper (~1500 words). In these pages, you should have a compelling introduction (provide an empirical description of your object and its powers), as well as the statement of your thesis, and a discussion of your research methods. In addition, you should provide a map of your paper – what are the sections and how are they organized? how does each section relate to your argument? Discuss each section in a paragraph or more. What do you imagine your conclusion discussing?

Rough Draft (5%) – Building on your First Five Pages, you will complete a full rough draft of your paper. Each section needs to be fully written, including the presentation of evidence, your discussion and interpretation of the evidence, and an articulation of how the evidence relates to your overall argument and fits into the structure of the paper. You will also complete a draft of your conclusion, in which you will discuss the implications for the object that you have identified. Each section should be at least five pages long, and the conclusion should be at least two pages long. The Rough Draft will be read and commented upon by the instructor.

Final Rough Draft (5%) – The Final Rough Draft must incorporate the comments of the instructor from your Rough Draft, and represent the final version of your paper. The paper should be complete for all intents and purposes, including completed introductions, sections, and conclusion, and full citations and bibliography.

Peer Reviews (2 @ 5% each) – First read this, on the ‘elements of productive peer review’: <http://bit.ly/2htngrT>. You will be randomly assigned two papers to read, and you are required to turn in a peer review for two of your peers. Each peer review should be 500-700 words long, and discuss the author’s argument, use of evidence, persuasiveness, and coherence. Additionally, you may choose to identify issues in your peers’ writing style. Late peer reviews will not be accepted for credit, but must be turned in to receive a grade for your final paper.

Final Paper & Response to Peer Reviews (5%) – In no less than 300 words, you should prepare a document that outlines how you have chosen to address (or not address) each of the concerns raised by the peer reviewers. You may either complete this in one or two documents. Your Final Paper should incorporate these changes as well, and you should address how you have included the critiques into your paper.

Final Presentation (5%) – In a 5-minute presentation, you should summarize your research project for the class. This may include visual aids (e.g. PowerPoint, a poster, etc.). You should describe the problem the object was intended to address and how it succeeded or failed (given its sociohistorical context).

Grading Scale

Grade modifiers are in effect for **all courses at Rensselaer**. Numerical weights associated with these grades are as follows: A=4.0, A-=3.67, B+=3.33 B=3.0, B-= 2.67, C+= 2.33, C=2.0 C-= 1.67, D+=1.33, D=1.0, F=0.0 (includes FA, Administrative Fail, the grade you receive if you do not turn in work or arrange for incomplete). Incompletes are rarely granted and must be negotiated in advance or an F will be assigned. To arrange an incomplete, you must turn in concrete schedule for completion next term and submit this request to the registrar on the correct form.

Policies:

Students taking the course Pass/Fail must earn a C to receive a Pass.

Disability access: Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute strives to make all learning experiences as accessible as possible. If you anticipate or experience academic barriers based on a disability, please let me know immediately so that we can discuss your options. To establish reasonable accommodations, please register with The Office of Disability Services for Students. After registration, make arrangements with the Director of Disability Services as soon as possible to discuss your accommodations so that they may be implemented in a timely fashion. DSS contact information: dss@rpi.edu; 518-276-8197; 4226 Academy Hall.

Academic Integrity – Student-teacher relationships are built on trust. For example, students must trust that teachers have made appropriate decisions about the structure and content of the courses they teach, and teachers must trust that the assignments that students turn in are their own. Acts that violate this trust undermine the

educational process. The [Rensselaer Handbook of Student Rights and Responsibilities](#) defines various forms of Academic Dishonesty and you should make yourself familiar with these. In this class, all assignments that are turned in for a grade must represent the student's own work. In cases where help was received, or teamwork was allowed, a notation on the assignment should indicate your collaboration.

The first violation of academic integrity results in null grade for that assignment. The second violation results in failure of the course. Violations of academic integrity may also be reported to the Dean of Students.

If you have any question concerning this policy before submitting an assignment, please ask for clarification. In addition, you can visit the following site for more information on our [Academic Integrity Policy: Students Rights, Responsibilities, and Judicial Affairs](#).

Contacting Me: I only check my email between 9-11 AM on weekday mornings and during my office hours. I will always respond to emails within 24 hours, except for emails received on Fridays, which will be responded to on the following Monday. If you would like to set up a time to talk, please contact me ahead of time, either by email (wolfmm@rpi.edu) or in person before or after class. **I am happy to set up a time to meet during normal business hours (i.e. Monday-Friday, 9 AM-5 PM) even if it doesn't fall within my declare office hours.**

Style Matters: All written work should be double-spaced, 12 point font, in Times New Roman, with 1 inch margins on all sides, and page numbers. Citation should look like this: (Author Year: Page), e.g. (Wolf-Meyer 2009: 408), which follows Chicago 17th. Using a reference manager (e.g. Zotero) will make this easy. Failure to meet these standards will result in a reduced grade.

Week 1: What's the Future?

1/9/24: Introduction

Discussion of syllabus, assignments, and course overview

Start reading: Butler's Parable of the Sower

1/12/24: Is the Future a Problem to be Solved?

Listen to John Luther Adams' "[Become Ocean](#)"

Butler, Tom

2015 [Overdevelopment, Overpopulation, Overshoot](#). New York: Goff Books.

Wist, Allie.

[What Dinner Might Look Like in a Future of Global Warming and Rising Sea Levels: Recipes for a Flooded Future](#). Saveur April 9, 2017.

Week Two: The Problem of Population

1/16/24: The Enduring Problem of Too Many Poor People

Malthus, T.R.

2015 [1798] 'An Essay on the Principle of Population.' An Essay on the Principle of Population and Other Writings. Robert J. Mayhew, ed. New York: Penguin.

Chapters 1-7, 18 & 19

1/19/24: Extrapolating American Disparities

Butler, Octavia

2000 [1993] Parable of the Sower. New York: Grand Central Publishing.

[TW: Sexual violence, violence against children, murder, racism]

Start reading: Vonnegut's Player Piano

Week Three: The Problem of Industrialization

1/23/24: Spatiotemporalities of Industrialization

Heinlein, Robert

1940 [1970] The Roads Must Roll *IN* The Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Volume One, 1929-1964. Robert Silverberg, ed. New York: Tom Doherty Associates.

Thompson, Edward Palmer.

1993 Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture. New York: New Press. **Selections**

1/26/24: Embodying Industrialization

Schivelbusch, Wolfgang

2014 [1977] The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century. Berkeley: University of California. **Selections**

Week Four: The Problem of Deindustrialization

1/30/24: Anticipating the End of Labor

Brynjolfsson, Erik and Andrew McAfee.

2016 The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies. New York: WW Norton. **Selections**

MacKenzie, Donald, and Judy Wajcman, eds. The Social Shaping of Technology: How the Refrigerator Got Its Hum. Bristol, PA: Open University Press, 1985. **Selections**

2/2/24: After Deindustrialization

Identify an Object Due

Vonnegut, Kurt

1999[1952] Player Piano. New York, Dial Press.

Watch at home: Blue Collar, Paul Schrader (1978)

Start reading: Le Guin's The Dispossessed

Week Five: The Solution of Communitarianism

2/6/24: Communism as Panacea for the 19th Century

Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels

1998 [1888] The Communist Manifesto. New York: Verso.

2/9/24: Extrapolating Human Natures

Le Guin, Ursula

1994 [1974] The Dispossessed. New York: Harper Voyager.

Week Six: The Problem of the Colony

2/13/24: The Frontier as Catalyst

Identify Resources Due

Turner, Frederick Jackson.

1998 Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Other Essays. New Haven: Yale University Press. **Selections**

2/16/24: De-Peopling the American Frontier

Student Presentations

Popper, Deborah E. and Frank J. Popper.

1987 The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust. Planning 53.12: 12-18.

Popper, Deborah E. and Frank J. Popper.

1999 The Buffalo Commons: Metaphor as Method. Geographical Review 89.4: 491-510.

Week Seven: The Problem of Domination

2/20/24: Segregation as Domination

Crapanzano, Vincent

1986 Waiting: The Whites of South Africa. New York: Vintage. **Selections**

Memmi, Albert

2000 Racism. Translated by Steve Martinot. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. **Selections**

2/23/24: Carcerality as Social Organization

DeConnick, Kelly Sue and Valentine De Landro

2015 Bitch Planet, Vol.1: Extraordinary Machine. La Jolla, CA: Image.

Watch at home: The Prison in 12 Landscapes (Brett Story, 2016)

Week Eight: The Problem of Revolution

2/27/24: The State as Social Actor

Thesis & Argumentation Due

Lenin, Vladimir Ilich.

1992 The State and Revolution. Translated by Robert Service. New York: Penguin. **Chapters 1 & 5**

3/1/24: Articulating New Social Orders

Black Panther Party's [Ten Point Program](#) (1966)

Coates, Ta-Nehisi

2014 The Case for Reparations. The Atlantic 313.5: 54-71.

X, Malcolm

1992 By Any Means Necessary. New York: Pathfinder Press. **Chapters 3 & 5**

Week Nine:

3/4/-3/8/24: Spring Break – No Classes

Start reading: Solomon's The Deep

Week Ten: The Solution of Afrofuturism

3/12/24:

Womack, Ytasha

2013 Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture. Chicago: Chicago Review Press. **Selections**

Watch: Black Panther, Ryan Coogler (2018)

3/15/24:

Solomon, Rivers

2019 The Deep. New York: Saga Press.

Start reading: Jones' The Bird is Gone

Week Eleven: The Solution of Indigenous Futures

3/19/24:

American Indian Movement's [Trail of Broken Treaties](#) (1972)

Dillon, Grace

2012 Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press. **Selections**

3/22/24:

First Five Pages Due

Jones, Stephen Graham.

2008 The Bird is Gone: A Manifesto. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.

Watch at home: Skawennati's [TimeTraveller](#) series

Start reading: Bear's Blood Music

Week Twelve: The Problem of Dehumanization

3/26/24:

Bear, Greg

1985 Blood Music. New York: Arbor House.

Start reading: Kolbert's The Sixth Extinction

3/29/24:

Rucka, Greg and Michael Lark

2014 Lazarus, Book 2. La Jolla, CA: Image Comics.

Watch at home: Elysium, Neill Blomkamp (2013)

Week Thirteen: The Problem of Extinction

4/2/24:

Rough Draft Due

Kolbert, Elizabeth

2014 The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History. New York: Henry Holt.

Prologue, Chapters 1-7

4/5/24:

Kolbert, Elizabeth

2014 The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History. New York: Henry Holt.

Chapters 8-13

Start reading: O'Brien and Abdelhadi' Everything for Everyone

Week Fourteen: Rebuilding a Common Future

4/9/24:

Final Draft Due

Clark, John Lee

2023 Touching the Future: A Manifesto in Essays. New York: WW Norton.

Selections

4/12/24:

O'Brien, M.E. and Eman Abdelhadi

2022 Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052-2072.

Brooklyn, NY: Common Notions.

Week Fifteen:

4/16/24:

Peer Reviews Due in Class

Student paper workshops

4/19/24:

TBD

Week Sixteen: Say Goodbye to the Future

4/23/24:

Final Student Presentations

Final Paper Due

Appendix A: Reading Guide for Non-Fiction

For each reading, you will need to fill out this form. Bring copies of each reading guide to class to receive credit and ensure that you understand each reading.

1. Who is the author? What kind of disciplinary background are they coming from (e.g. anthropology, history, sociology, medicine)?
2. Who is the piece written for? How can you infer the audience?
3. What is the main argument and goal of the writing? -- to verify something? or challenge a theoretical claim? In other words, if you had to explain it in class, how would you summarize it?
4. Identify the author's thesis.
5. What are the key concepts used? Are concepts challenged or invented?
6. How are citations used? Who is being engaged with and how?
7. What is the article, book, or chapters about, empirically? In other words, what is being studied as the object? Where are the events and people geographically situated? What is the scale of analysis? (e.g. nation, region, city, institution, person?) When did the study take place?
8. What methods were used in collecting data? (ethnography, interviews, statistics, textual analysis, archival research?) Does the data look at what people do, say, or think? How was the data analyzed? What assumptions -- of the author or his or her society -- shaped the inquiry? What core values are assumed? What data would strengthen the text?
9. Discuss a passage (citing page number) that inspired you or frustrated you. Then type out a paragraph or two (160-300 words) discussing that passage (citing page number) and describing how it resonated or clashed with other course content (which might be a discussion, a film, or another text).
10. If you take one thing away from the text, what would it be? In other words, if you're telling a friend about this article, what's the one nugget you would share to make start a conversation?

Appendix B: Fiction Reading Guide

For each fictional reading (novel, short story, graphic novel), you will need to fill out this form. Bring copies of each reading guide to class to receive credit and ensure that you understand each reading.

1. Who is the author? What kind of background are they coming from?
2. Who is it written for? How can you infer the audience?
3. What is the story about, empirically? In other words, who are the characters? What are their motivations? Where do they live and go to? When does the story take place? Are there particular technological or social features that make the story obviously 'futuristic'?
4. What's the big idea in the story? That is, what's the idea that the author is working with from which he or she extrapolates this story? How does the author use estrangement in the story to make characters, events, or technologies new or alien to the reader?
5. What inspirations can you identify for the text? That is, is the author obviously playing with ideas that you've encountered elsewhere (in the class or in your other reading)? Can you think of things that you've read, watched, or listened to that might be inspired by this text?
6. What is the author's embedded assumption about 'human nature'? What does the author think that humans are intrinsically motivated by, and how does the story reveal these ideas about human nature?
7. What theories about society and social arrangements is the author working with? How are things like gender, sexuality, class, race, disability, ethnicity, etc. used to highlight how society operates?
8. Discuss a passage (citing page number) that inspired you or frustrated you. Then type out a paragraph or two (160-300 words) discussing that passage (citing page number) and describing how it resonated or clashed with other course content (which might be a discussion, a film, or another text).
9. If you take one thing away from the text, what would it be? In other words, if you're telling a friend about this story, what's the one nugget you would share to make start a conversation?

Appendix C: Film Viewing Guide

For each film, you will need to fill out this form. Bring copies of each viewing guide to class to receive credit and ensure that you understand each film.

1. Who is the director of the film? What kind of background are they coming from?
2. Who is the piece made for? How can you infer the audience?
3. What is the main argument and goal of the film? -- to demonstrate something? or tell a particular story? In other words, if you had to explain it in class, how would you summarize it?
4. Identify the filmmaker's intent. What is the big idea of the film?
5. What are the key concepts used?
6. What is the film about, empirically? In other words, what is being studied as the object? Where are the events and people geographically situated?
7. Discuss a scene from the film that inspired you or frustrated you. Then type out a paragraph or two (160-300 words) discussing that scene and describing how it resonated or clashed with other course content (which might be a discussion, another film, or a text).
8. If you take one thing away from the film, what would it be? In other words, if you're telling a friend about this film, what's the one nugget you would share to make start a conversation?