

Social/Science/Fiction
HNRS-302.010H • Spring Semester 2010

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This course will meet Thursdays, 2:10pm-4:50pm, in Hurst 211.



[PROCEDURE FOR HAVING A SCHEDULED OFFICE VISIT WITH PTJ]: regular office-hours are unscheduled, and are generally some combination of first-come, first-served plus a periodic triage for time constraints and the like. These hours will change from week to week, but generally will be sometime on Mondays or Wednesdays. During regular office-hours, I am guaranteed to be in my office and available for a face-to-face chat. If you cannot make it to regular office hours, and you don't want to just drop in and take your chances, *you have to make appointments with PTJ by e-mail*. First, check PTJ's calendar online (<http://ical.mac.com/onyxdr/Patrick>); second, request an open time-slot; third, wait for an e-mailed confirmation before writing the appointment into your own schedule.]

Course Objective and Description

Social science has the explanation of society as its explicit goal. Social scientists often try to achieve this goal by studying historical situations in order to elucidate the impact of various factors on outcomes, in the hopes that those impacts can then be extrapolated to other cases. Authors of science fiction engage in similar strategies, although their methods are often more speculative and their conclusions more metaphorical. This commonality of orientation and approach forms the impetus for this course. Is social science a form of science fiction? What, if anything, distinguishes imaginative constructions from scientific constructions? Is science fiction a form of social science? Can an engagement with works of science fiction enhance our understanding of political and social relations? These and other related questions will be explored through readings of various texts (including films) of social science and science fiction.

In partial deference to this auspicious year, this semester's course will be entirely focused on a single recurrent theme: the cultural politics of alien encounter. I phrase it this way to avoid the misperceptions that a) this is a class about the actual or potential existence of extraterrestrial life; or that b) this is a class about actual contact between humans and extraterrestrials. It is neither. Instead, our subject will be confined to the various ways in which non-terrestrial others—aliens—have been envisioned and imagined, and how the relations between humans and those aliens have been depicted. As we shall see, the human/alien interface is a very productive site for the investigation of a number of topics of extreme social and political relevance, and those connections between "fact" and "fiction" will inform the bulk of our conversations.

Three important points about this class, by way of a negative definition of our enterprise. 1) It is *not* a “science fiction appreciation” class; it is not a science fiction fan club. While I presume that many of you will probably be fans of the genre, the class is not simply a forum for displaying our fanaticism to one another. 2) It is *not* primarily a literature class. The artistic merits and literary styles of individual authors and texts may figure into our discussions from time to time, but I do not expect them to be central issues of concern. 3) It is *not* simply an excuse to read and watch science fiction for credit. If you peruse the assignments detailed below, you will discover that this class demands as much—if not more—work than other seminars. Granted, you may find some of the work more enjoyable because of the subject-matter, but that should not distract from the seriousness of the endeavor.

Do not try to out-geek the professor, either. He has been attending both *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* conventions since before you were born.

Emergency Preparedness

The university requests that I remind you of the following: “In the event of a declared pandemic or other emergency, students should refer to the AU Web site (www.prepared.american.edu) and the AU information line at (202) 885-1100 for general university-wide information, as well as contact their faculty and/or respective dean’s office for course and school/ college-specific information.”

Learning Outcomes

And the number of the counting shall be three. By the end of the semester, you should be able to:

- 1) describe and discuss, with appropriate examples, the range of meanings that “alien encounter” has in our present cultural imagination;
- 2) explicate some suggestive parallels between these fictional alien encounters and actual social and political events; and
- 3) reflect critically on what our ways of imagining alien encounters say about our humanity and our human social and political arrangements.

As per usual, you will demonstrate how well you have achieved these outcomes through a variety of course components and assignments.

Assignments and Grading

This class is a seminar. What that means to me is that the overwhelming majority of our time together in the classroom will be spent in vigorous discussion of the texts assigned for that week. Class participation is crucial both to your experience in the course and to your eventual grade for the course. I will not be taking attendance, as we’re all adults here, but if you are not in class you cannot participate. Be forewarned.

To help ensure that everyone has something to say in class, and also to keep the conversation(s) going outside of class, everyone enrolled in the course will be required to participate in a blogging group as detailed in the “blog rubric” that may be found at the end of this syllabus after the detailed daily schedule of readings.

Each student will be required to write a final paper (which can be either an analytical essay on several works of social science and science fiction, or a work of fiction exploring some of the themes we’ve discussed in the course) at the end of the semester; topics need to be discussed with me in advance, and you are required to turn in a one-page conceptualization of your paper on 4 April. Paper length is negotiable, depending on your topic, but I suspect that most papers will end up in the range of 20-25 pages. Papers are due on 5 May 2010.

The paper and the conceptualization *must* be submitted to me electronically. In order to do this, please save your document in (preferably) MS Word or (if *absolutely* necessary) rtf format, and email them to me at the address above. [I’m not a Microsoft booster, but Word’s comment-embedding feature is second to none at the moment, and I greatly prefer to use it instead of placing comments in footnotes. Also, please note that I am not using Word 2007/2008, so I need documents in .doc, *not* .docx format.] Please name your document as follows: yourlastname_paper.doc or yourlastname_paper.rtf, where yourlastname is, of course, your last name. I will send an acknowledgment by e-mail when I receive your paper, and will return the paper with comments embedded in the text when I have evaluated it.

In addition, we will be updating a class wiki over the course of the semester. To get us going, each student will start one new wiki page during the course of the semester, and will take the lead role—perhaps as part of a two-person team—in updating one existing page. [Note that the wiki we will be updating was started by my last “Social/Science/Fiction” class; since some of the books we’re reading were also read then, those pages already exist. There are also pages for a number of additional things.] The page on the assigned reading for a given week must be up or updated 24 hours before the class session for which the work is assigned. The other page will be on a work not assigned for the course; the second page must be up before the end of April. Since the wiki will be a collective product, all students will also receive a collective grade on the quality of the product as a whole; as part of that, feel free to contribute additional pages to the wiki, or to modify and improve individual pages started by someone else.

Please also note that the wiki is *not* “spoiler-free.” Please do not examine the existing wiki pages for *Ender’s Game*, *Speaker for the Dead*, *The Sparrow*, and *Children of God* until you have read the respective book.

Our wiki will be located at <http://socialsciencefiction.wetpaint.com/> . Please go and sign up as a user, and then I’ll make you an editor. Once you have signed up and been

confirmed as an editor, please send me an e-mail message with your top three choices for a piece of assigned reading for which you wish to be responsible, along with your full name and your AUID. If you are assigned a week where no page exists for that week's reading, then that page is your required "new" page for the semester, and you should select another page on the site to maintain/update; if your week's reading already has a page, then you should talk to me about what you would like to add. I have provided a list of suggested supplemental texts, but am quite amenable to other suggestions—just talk to me before you put up whatever you want to count towards your individual grade.

Semester grades will be calculated as follows:

Class participation	40%
Blogging	20%
Final paper	20%
Individual wiki pages	15%
Collective wiki grade	5%

[No, that's not a typo: your blogging *is* worth as much as your final paper.]

Readings and Daily Schedule

Required readings have been ordered at the AU Bookstore. *Please* use the editions specified, as this will make it much easier for us to have text-based discussions.

Texts are listed on the days for which they are assigned. In no case are recommended supplemental texts required (this is why they are "recommended," after all), although you are welcome to read/view them if you desire, and bring them into class discussion if you find them helpful. Be aware that not everyone in the class will necessarily have read/seen that text, so you may have to do some more basic explication during the discussion.

A note on films. All of the films will be shown on Tuesday evenings in the regular classroom in Hurst. Many are also available for viewing at the AU Library on your own time. Films are *strongly recommended*, but not *required*; they will most likely be brought up in class discussion, but they are not as central to those discussions as the required readings are. I do not expect that people will take notes on films while first viewing them, and films will be shown with room lights dimmed; if you wish to view a film for the purpose of taking more extensive notes, talk to the library or to me about a loan.

12 Janaury film: *Men in Black*

14 January Defining "science fiction"
Required: nothing.

Recommended supplemental readings: Introductory chapter in *To Seek Out New Worlds*, ed. Jutta Weldes (Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); Isaac Asimov, *Foundation*; Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction*; Tom Shippey, ed., *Fictional Space*; Brian W. Aldiss, *The Billion-year Spree*; Max Weber, "The 'Objectivity' of Social Science and Social Policy"; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973), esp. Chapter 1; John Shotter, *Conversational Realities* (Sage, 1993).

19 January film: *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*, and a couple of scenes from *Independence Day*

21 January Alien Attack
Required: H. G. Wells, *War of the Worlds* (Modern Library Classics, 2002).

26 January film: *Aliens*

28 January The Other I: Elimination
Required: Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game* (Author's Definitive Edition, Tor, 1994)
Recommended: Iain M. Banks, *Consider Phlebas*; Robert Heinlein, *Starship Troopers*.

2 February film: *Starship Troopers*

4 February Friends and Enemies
Required: Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (University of Chicago, 1996)
Recommended: Harold Lasswell, "The Garrison State," *American Journal of Sociology* 46 (January 1941).

9 February film: *Starman*

11 February The Other II: Communication
Required: Orson Scott Card, *Speaker for the Dead* (Author's Definitive Edition, Tor, 1994)
Recommended: Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*; Iver Neumann, *Uses of the Other*.

16-18 February NO CLASS—PTJ at a conference, where among other things he is presenting a paper on *Battlestar Galactica*

23 February film: four episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*

- 25 February The Final Frontier
 Required: Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles* (Bantam Spectra, 1979)
 Recommended: Kim Stanley Robinson, *Red Mars*, *Blue Mars*, and *Green Mars*; Isaac Asimov, *The Caves of Steel*, *The Naked Sun*, and *The Robots of Dawn*.
- 2 March film: *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, plus one episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*
- 4 March Imaginary Spaces
 Required: Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny* (Hill and Wang)
 Recommended: *Star Trek* chapters in Weldes, ed., *To Seek Out New Worlds*; *Forbidden Planet*.
- mid-semester blogging report due 8 March @ 5:00pm*
- 9-11 March NO CLASS—Spring Break
- 16 March film: *K-Pax*
- 18 March Almost-Familiar Aliens
 Required: Sheri S. Tepper, *Grass* (Gollancz, 2002).
 Recommended: Robert Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land*; Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower*; Ursula LeGuin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*; *The Fifth Element*; *Planet of the Apes*.
- 23 March film: *Solaris*
- 25 March Radical Aliens
 Required: Stanislaw Lem, *His Master's Voice* (Northwestern University Press, 1999)
 Recommended: Lem, *Fiasco*; Vernor Vinge, *A Fire Upon the Deep*; Robert Charles Wilson, *Axis*; 2001.
- 30 March film: *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (original version)
- 1 April The Other III: Discovery
 Required: Mary Doria Russell, *The Sparrow* (Ballentine, 1996)
 Recommended: Stephen R. Donaldson, *The Gap* series; Iain M. Banks, *Excession*; *The Abyss*; *Enemy Mine*; Joan Slonszewski, *A Door Into Ocean*; Larry Niven, *The Mote in God's Eye*.

one-page conceptualization of final paper due 2 April @ 5:00pm; note that if I do not have this in hand, your final paper will be penalized one full grade!

6 April film: *The Brother From Another Planet*

8 April Conquest and Understanding
Required: Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1999)
Recommended: Sheri S. Tepper, *Sideshow*; Gene Wolfe, *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*.

13 April film: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*

15 April The Other IV: Transformation
Required: Mary Doria Russell, *Children of God* (Ballentine, 1998)
Recommended: Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End*; David Brin, *Sundiver*; Iain M. Banks, *The Player of Games*; Carl Sagan, *Contact*.

20 April film: *District 9*

22 April Epistemic Incommensurability
Required: Michael Flynn, *Eifelheim* (Tor, 2006)
Recommended: Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*; Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (University of Chicago Press, 2005); Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*; Iain M. Banks, *Use of Weapons*.

27 April film: *Contact*

29 April Intervention
Required: Iain M. Banks, *Look to Windward* (Pocket Books, 2002)
Recommended: Iain M. Banks, *Inversions*; Iain M. Banks, *Transition*; Robert Charles Wilson, *Spin*.

final blogging report due 3 May @ 5:00pm

final papers due 5 May @ 5:00pm

ProfPTJ's Blogging Rubric • Spring 2010 edition

What is a blog? Short for “weblog,” a blog is a publicly-accessible online journal to which you can post thoughts, reflections, links to other websites, and the like. There are free blog-hosting services like blogger.com, as well as services that charge a small fee for hosting. The major advantage of a blog from my perspective is that it is viewable by anyone with a web browser, which means that anybody can join in the conversation; a secondary advantage is the fact that blogs are part of the wider web-based ‘Net, so that bloggers can, through their posts, join in wider conversations that take place between sites.

Why do you require blogging for this course? Once upon a time I assigned students traditional journals or weekly one-page critical response papers; such an exercise does get people thinking about the material outside of class and promotes self-reflection, but it had two major drawbacks: each student was simply carrying on a one-on-one dialogue with me, and if I got a bit behind on replying to those weekly papers the dialogue ground to a halt. Blogging serves the function of a weekly critical response paper, but goes one better by encouraging conversations between students *outside of class*, since all of the posts are publicly accessible.

Why create blogging groups? Rather than having each student maintain an individual blog, which might promote individual reflection but might impede conversation as each student focused on their own blog to the detriment of others, I will divide the class into groups of three to five people—a “blogging group”—and have each group maintain a blog for the course of the semester. Participating in a blogging group gives you a ready-made set of conversational partners, a series of posts that you would really have to work hard to avoid reacting to in your own posts, and an opportunity to try out ideas in a group setting before bringing them to wider class discussion—or to elaborate on a portion of the class discussion afterwards.

Are we confined to our own group's blog? No. I will make all of the blog addresses available to everyone (once they are e-mailed to me) through my public blog: <http://profptj.blogspot.com>. You are welcome to read other groups' blogs, and comment on things that are posted there, or to reference them in your own posts—preferably by including links to their posts in your own. Note that I will also be blogging right along with you on my personal blog, and you're welcome to bounce off of what I post there if you'd like.

Your individual blogging grade—everyone will get an individual grade, although one portion of that grade will be the same for all members of a blogging group—will depend on three factors: the extent to which your course blog meets technical requirements; your individual posting history; and your conversational performance.

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS. Each blogging group will create a blog before the second class session. The blog's url, and the real name and user ID of everyone enrolled in the blog, should be e-mailed to me as soon as the blog is set up. I am indifferent as to the blog hosting service that you use; I use blogger.com, mainly because it's free and easy to set up. Each of these blogs must have the following features:

- Every member of the blogging group *must be a member of the blog as an individual*. In practice this means that each member of the group must have their own user ID, so that

posts that they make will be clearly identified as belonging to them. You need not use your true name as your blogging ID, as long as I know who you are.

- The blog must permit *comments* on individual posts. You may choose to permit anonymous comments or you may require people to create a user ID in order to comment.
- Each individual post must have a *readily-accessible static url* that people can use to reference the post. Different hosting services have different ways of making this static url available to readers, and you should make sure that your blog makes it obvious how people can obtain that address.
- Finally, each blog must have some easy way that a viewer can bring up *all posts written by a specific author*. With Blogger, this is a matter of tagging your posts and then creating an appropriate sidebar link; other options exist for other blogging platforms.

Every member of the blogging group will receive the same grade for this portion of their score; fulfilling all of the technical requirements gets you an easy A on this section. However, I am *not* going to take class time to explain how to do any of these technical issues. If you have technical questions, I suggest that you either a) hit the 'Net; b) ask around; or c) come to see me during office hours.

INDIVIDUAL POSTING HISTORY. Each student is required to post three different kinds of things on their group's blog, and must have one post per category per week. The first category, a substantive post on the weekly assigned reading, must be online before noontime on the Tuesday preceding class (so that everyone will have a chance to read and perhaps react to the post before class). The second category, consisting of "reflective" postings that begin with class discussion, or from an issue raised by any of the week's reading(s), or from a point raised by someone else in their blog posting for the week, must be online before 5:00pm on Sunday of that week. The third category, a comment on someone else's post, should be posted sometime between one class and the next class. Hence, a typical week looks like this: before Tuesday noontime, response to the week's readings posted; Thursday, class; before 5:00pm Sunday, weekly reflections posted; before the following Thursday, one comment on someone else's post posted.

Note that these are minimums, not maximums. Feel free to post more.

Each enrolled student will keep a record of all of the postings that they make, broken down by weeks. This record, which you should keep on your hard drive and update after you post an entry or make a comment on someone else's entry, should clearly indicate the static url of each entry that you make and each comment that you post. An easy way to do this is to make each week's section of the record look like the following:

Week X
substantive: <http://blah.blah.blah>
reflection: <http://blah.blah.blah>
comments: <http://blah.blah.blah>; <http://blah.blah.blah>; <http://blah.blah.blah>.

[Obviously, you should replace the X and blah.blah.blah by the appropriate information for each posting.]

Naturally, this whole schedule breaks down at the end of the semester. No comment is required after the last class, but there does need to be a final substantive post the Tuesday before our last class and a final reflection the Sunday after our last class.

Each student will be required to submit that record to me by e-mail *twice* during the semester: once in the middle of the semester (must be received by 5pm on 8 March), and once at the end of the semester (must be received by 5pm on 3 May). Fulfilling all of the weekly posting requirements will guarantee you an A in this portion of your score.

CONVERSATIONAL PERFORMANCE. If the previous two portions of your blogging grade were marks for technical merit, this is the portion of your grade that depends on creativity and artistic flair. In order to blog well, you need to be an active part of a series of online conversations. You signal your participation in such conversations in three ways:

- Referring to other people's posts in your own, preferably by embedding a link to their post's static url in your own post. Note that you are in no way limited to referring to posts made by other members of the class; the blogosphere is a vast place these days, and you should feel free to explore it.
- Commenting on other people's posts, and reacting to comments on your own posts. This is the most direct way to engage someone in conversation: reacting to something that they have specifically written. One comment per week is required, but this is the sort of thing that I expect stellar students to be doing on a regular basis. Once again, you are not limited to commenting on posts by other members of the class, or to posting comments on blogs maintained by class blogging groups. And you are in no way limited to posting *one* comment, especially if the author of the original post posts a comment to your comment...
- Using trackbacks to signal that a conversation is going on. If you find a post and want to post about it yourself, you can send a "trackback ping" to the first post indicating the static url of your post. That way people reading the post on which you have commented will know that there is a post out there in the blogosphere that discusses it or refers to it.

The point is that you need to be an active participant in online discussions over the course of the semester. Quantity is not the central issue here, as long as you reach the minimum requirements; the *quality* of your posts and comments is much more important. References, comments, and trackbacks are simply ways to trace the conversational threads, as is the individual posting record that you are maintaining.

I will send each enrolled student a mid-course report on their blogging at the approximate mid-point of the semester, and a final report will be sent out during finals week in May.