

POL487: The International Politics of Science Fiction



Winter 2024
Thursdays 1-3pm

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office hours: Fridays 10-12 via [Calendly](#)

This course examines the intersection of science fiction and global politics. We will engage with classic and contemporary sci-fi works that touch upon key IR concepts like anarchy, empire, arms races, and hegemony.

Course Requirements

Reading responses (50%). These are short responses (350-500 words) that critically assess the week's readings and raise questions related to the political themes and arguments in those readings.

There are eleven responses in total, worth 5% each, in Weeks 1-10 and 12. I will drop your lowest mark when calculating the overall grade. The responses are due (via Quercus) by midnight the day before class. More information is available in the reading responses handout.

Course engagement (15%). Marks for course engagement are typically determined by things like who talks a lot during class. In this course such participation is only one component of course engagement, and implies not only consistent but *useful* participation, as well as things like:

- being prepared by reading everything beforehand and coming in ready to discuss
- being specific and concrete with your comments
- staying focused and engaged by avoiding distractions during class
- listening to what others are saying (and keeping in mind what they are not saying)
- most importantly, *asking questions* – in your writing, in office hours, in chats with fellow students, in response to their comments on Quercus, and of course in our weekly discussions.

Short story (35%). Yes, there is a fiction writing component for this course. I want to emphasize, however, that this is not a creative writing class, and the story will not be judged on its artistic merits. Instead, the main criterion will be how well the story integrates a concept (or multiple concepts) from international relations theory in a way that both satisfies the plot and stays true to the concept's nature. In Week 11, we will hold a group workshop where you will be divided into small groups and discuss each other's drafts. The final product will consist of two components: the story itself, which should be 15-20 pages long (double-spaced) and a one-page single-spaced addendum that explains the concept(s) and how they relate to both the story and IR theory.

About the readings

We will sample a small piece of a large literature. We will experiment and see what works. Many of these books are available free online in some form, whether via libgen or other sources. The UofT library has many of them online as well. However, I would encourage you to buy cheap paperback copies whenever possible. It may seem old-fashioned but it will give you a totemic physical object to lug around all week as you go through it. Here is the list, in the order we will read them:

- *The Player of Games* by Iain M. Banks (1991)
- *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* by Ursula K. LeGuin (1974)
- *Starship Troopers* by Robert A. Heinlein (1959)
- *Neuromancer* by William Gibson (1984)
- *The Three-Body Problem* by Liu Cixin (2008)
- *Dawn* by Octavia Butler (1987)
- *Embassytown* by China Miéville (2011)
- *Red Mars* by Kim Stanley Robinson (1992)

- *Vagabonds* by Hao Jingfan (2020)

All other short readings are available online or on the Quercus website.

Session 1 – January 11

response #1 due

- Noah Smith (2023) "[In Defense of Science Fiction](#)"

Session 2 – January 18

response #2 due

- *Independence Day* (1994)
- Wendt, Alexander, and Raymond Duvall. 2008. "Sovereignty and the UFO." *Political Theory* 36 (4): 607-633.
- J. Furman Daniel III and Paul Musgrave, 2017. "Synthetic Experiences: How Popular Culture Matters for Images of International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly*, 61(3): 503-516
- Jutta Weldes, 2003. "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. 1-16.
- Daniel Drezner, 2014. *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*, Revived Edition. p. 36-62, 75-83

Session 3 – January 25

response #3 due

- *The Player of Games* by Iain M. Banks (1991)
- "Governing the Alien Nation: The Comparative Politics of Extraterrestrials" by Clyde Wilcox

Session 4 – February 1

response #4 due

- Ursula K. LeGuin, 1974. *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*.
- "Representation is Futile? American Anti-Collectivism and the Borg" by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon

- “State, Heterotopia: The Political Imagination in Heinlein, Le Guin, and Delany” by Neil Easterbrook

Session 5 – February 8

response #5 due

- "Starship Troopers" by Robert A. Heinlein (1959)
- Watch the movie
- [Voting is Violence: Starship Troopers and Liberal Political Philosophy](#), 2023, by James (Anonymous)
- “Military, Democracy, and the State in Robert A. Heinlein's Starship Troopers” by Everett Carl Dolman (in Hassler and Wilcox edited volume – see readings for Session 3)
- Ronald R. Krebs, 2004. “A School for the Nation? How Military Service Does Not Build Nations, and How it Might,” *International Security* 28(4): 85-124.

Session 6 – February 15

response #6 due

- *Neuromancer* by William Gibson (1984)
- “No Future! Cyberpunk, Industrial Music, and the Aesthetics of Postmodern Disintegration” by Patrick Novotny (in Hassler and Wilcox)

[February 22 – no class]

Session 7 – February 29

response #7 due

- *The Three-Body Problem* by Liu Cixin (2008) [page selections TBA]
- Watch [this video](#)
- Dyson, Stephen Benedict. 2019. "Images of International Politics in Chinese Science Fiction: Liu Cixin's Three-Body Problem." *New Political Science* 41 (3): 459-475.
- Wayne, Rick. 2023. "The Problem with the Three-Body Problem." *Medium*.
- Chenchen Zhang. 2023. "[The Three-Body Problem: The Imperative of Survival and the Misogyny of Reactionary Rhetoric.](#)" *Made in China Journal*.

Session 8 – March 7

response #8 due

- *Dawn* by Octavia Butler (1987)
- "In Every Revolution, There Is One Man with a Vision": The Governments of the Future in Comparative Perspective" by Paul Christopher Manuel (in Hassler and Wilcox)

Session 9 – March 14

response #9 due

- *Embassytown* by China Miéville (2011)

[March 21 – no class]

Session 10 – March 28

response #10 due

- *Red Mars* by Kim Stanley Robinson (1992)
- "Stranger than Fiction: Silicon Valley and the Politics of Space Colonization" by Emily Ray

Session 11 – April 4. Short story workshop.

Session 12 – April 8 [make-up session]

response #11 due

- *Vagabonds* by Hao Jingfan (2020)