

Professor: Angus Burgin ([burgin@jhu.edu](mailto:burgin@jhu.edu))  
Office hours: [Wednesday 4:00pm–5:20pm](#)

## FRESHMAN SEMINAR: THE POLITICS OF THE FUTURE

### Overview:

Since the industrial revolution the rapid pace of technological change, and accompanying uncertainties about its direction and implications, has linked social and political theory to speculative conceptions of the future. This course will explore that intersection. Our readings will focus primarily on the period after the Second World War, when transformative developments in computing and communications technology enabled some economies to transition away from an emphasis on agricultural and industrial production and toward services (without outsized gains accruing to the financial sector and some of those engaged in “knowledge work”). The initial readings are set in the midst of the Cold War, amid widespread concerns about the relationship between communications technology and totalitarianism, and the viability of liberal political institutions amid new media technologies like radio and television. We will then explore the rise of the computer industry, and discussions it provoked about the nature of work and leisure amid “automation” and the prospect of “artificial intelligence.” In later weeks we will turn to debates about the implications of the internet, whether emerging instantaneous and embodied forms of communication would foster social cohesion or “cyberbalkanization,” and how race and gender would evolve in an increasingly networked world. Finally, we will consider how new technologies have affected both liberal and authoritarian political institutions by fostering new means of surveillance and dissent.

### Learning Objectives:

Students in this course will learn:

- how to approach and comprehend difficult works of social and political theory;
- how to situate literary and philosophical texts in their social and intellectual contexts, in order to gain a clearer understanding of the author’s intended meaning;
- how to critique and defend complex philosophical arguments in oral debate;
- how to develop forceful written arguments that acknowledge and illuminate the depth and subtlety of their subjects;
- how to recognize the effect of narrative constructions of the past and future on present-day policy debates;
- how to evaluate the social, philosophical, and ethical implications of new technologies;
- and how to appreciate the historical contingency of contemporary social philosophies.

## Assignments and Grading:

- 10% Perusall responses (to access course on perusall.com, use the access code BURGIN-JCX82)
- 30% class participation
- 10% class presentation
- 20% first paper (5–7 pages, with revision option)
- 30% second paper (8–10 pages)

The course will meet weekly from 1:30–3:50pm Eastern Time on Mondays. Prior to most meetings students will be asked to respond to several brief prompts via the course's social e-reading app, Perusall. The nature of these assignments will vary from week to week. Each of the weekly responses will not be longer than ten sentences in length.

There are two major writing assignments in this course. Both writing assignments will involve a critical analysis of a film or literary text chosen by you from the attached lists, drawing on some of the contexts discussed in the course and/or additional primary or secondary sources. All papers are due by 4:00pm on the deadline date. After that time, the grades of late papers will be lowered one level for each day they are late (e.g., a grade of B becomes a B- if one day late, a C+ if two days late, etc.). Students will have an opportunity to submit a revised version of the first paper, for a revised grade, within two weeks of receiving comments on it.

Additionally, each student will be expected to make a ten-minute class presentation that contextualizes and expands upon a selection from one week's readings (chosen by students in the second week of the course).

Students who are unable to attend class meetings will be asked to complete a three-page response paper on the readings prior to the following week's meeting, and to attend the professor's office hours to discuss it. Students are not allowed to receive more than two such excused absences. All students in the course are expected to visit the professor's office hours at least once during the course of the semester.

The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. Ethical violations include cheating on exams, plagiarism, reuse of assignments, improper use of the Internet and electronic devices, unauthorized collaboration, alteration of graded assignments, forgery and falsification, lying, facilitating academic dishonesty, and unfair competition. Please report any violations you witness to the instructor. You may consult the associate dean of student conduct (or designee) by calling the Office of the Dean of Students at 410-516-8208 or via email at [integrity@jhu.edu](mailto:integrity@jhu.edu). For more information, see the Homewood Student Affairs site on academic ethics: (<https://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/policies-guidelines/undergrad-ethics/>).

## Texts:

All course readings will be made available online via Perusall or electronic reserve.

## MEETINGS

### Monday, January 25th: Introduction

### Monday, February 1st: Technology and the Problem of the Future

- Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, chs. 33–34.
- Langdon Winner, “Technologies as Forms of Life” in *The Whale and the Reactor*, pp. 3–18.
- Reinhart Koselleck, “The Space of Experience and Horizon of Expectations,” in *Futures Past: Semantics of Historical Time*, pp. 255–275.
- Fredric Jameson, “Progress versus Utopia; or, Can we Imagine the Future?,” *Science Fiction Studies* 9, no. 2 (July 1982), pp. 147–158.

### Monday, February 8th: The Future of Liberalism and the Totalitarian Threat (reading reduced due to snow day)

- Bell, “The End of Ideology in the West,” in *The End of Ideology*, pp. 393–408.

### Monday, February 15th: Cybernetics, Automation, and the Specter of A.I.

- Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (Houghton Mifflin, 1950), chapter 1, “What is Cybernetics?,” (pp. 1–19) and chapter 10, “The First and Second Industrial Revolution” (pp. 164–189).
- Hubert Dreyfus, *What Computers Can't Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason* (Harper, 1972), chapter 7, “The Role of the Body in Intelligent Behavior” (pp. 147–167), chapter 9, “The Situation as a Function of Human Needs” (pp. 184–192).
- J.C.R. Licklider, “Man-Computer Symbiosis,” *IRE*, pp. 4–11.
- Daniel Bell, “The Social Framework of the Information Society,” *The Microelectronics Revolution* (Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp. 500–549.

\* Wednesday, February 17th: First Paper Proposals (1p.) Due \*

### Monday, February 22nd: Television and the Rise of the Electrical Sublime

#### *Assigned Readings:*

- Carey, James W. “Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph,” *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 201–230.
- Jurgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article,” *New German Critique* 3 (Autumn 1974), pp. 49–55.

- Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, “A Propaganda Model,” from *Manufacturing Consent* (1988).
- Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, ch. 1, 2, 31, 33.
- Richard Serra and Carlotta Schoolman. *Television Delivers People* (short film, screened in class).

\* Friday, February 27th: First Papers Due \*

### Monday, March 1st: Gender and Postmodernism

- Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s.”
- Nancy Fraser, “After the Family Wage: Gender Equity and the Welfare State,” *Political Theory* 22, no. 4 (1994), pp. 591–618.
- Ursula Le Guin, “Is Gender Necessary?” in Le Guin, *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction* (1989).

### Monday, March 8th: Afrofuturism, Then and Now

- W.E.B. DuBois, “The Comet.”
- Bell Hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” *Postmodern Culture* 1(1).
- Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert Rodman, “Race in Cyberspace: An Introduction,” in *Race in Cyberspace* (Routledge, 2000), pp. 1–14.
- Alondra Nelson, “Introduction: Future Texts,” *Social Text* 71 (Summer 2002), special issue on “Afrofuturism,” pp. 1–15.

\* Friday, March 12th: Second Paper Proposals (~1–2pp.) Due \*

### Week of March 15th: Individual Meetings to Discuss Paper Proposals

### Monday, March 29th: Globalization and the Problem of World Order

- Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 16, no. 4 (1974), pp. 387–415.
- Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *National Interest* 16 (1989), pp. 3–18.
- Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993), pp. 22–48.

### Monday, April 5th: The Cyberspace Age

- Stewart Brand, “We Owe it all to the Hippies,” *Time* 145, no. 12 (Spring 1995).
- John Perry Barlow, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” (1996).
- Hubert Dreyfus, “Disembodied Telepresence and the Remoteness of the Real,” *On The Internet* (Routledge, 2002), pp. 50–72.

- Sherry Turkle, “Always-on/Always-on-you: The Tethered Self,” in *Handbook of Mobile Communications and Social Change*, ed. James Katz (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT).

### **Monday, April 12th: The Networked Imagination**

- *The Social Dilemma*, directed by Jeff Orlowski (Netflix, 2020).

### **Monday, April 19th: Privacy, Surveillance, and the Digital Future**

- Shoshanna Zuboff, “Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization,” *Journal of Information Technology* (2015) 30, pp. 75–89.
- Wendy Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiberoptics* (MIT, 2006), ch. 1 (37–76).

### **Monday, April 26th: Posthumanism and the Anthropocene**

- Vernor Vinge, “The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era” (1993).
- Alex Williams & Nick Srnicek, “Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics” (2013).
- Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future* (FSG, 2002), ch. 1.
- Nick Bostrom, “Why I Want to be a Posthuman When I Grow Up” (2008), pp. 111–120, 131–135.
- Kim Stanley Robinson, “Remarks on Utopia in the Age of Climate Change,” *Utopian Studies* 27, no. 1 (2016), section on “Climate Change and the Necessity of the Utopian Project,” pp. 9–15.

**\* Monday, May 10: SECOND PAPERS DUE \***

## Novels:

- Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (1888)
- Mary E. Bradley Lane, *Mizora: A Prophecy* (1890)
- William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (1890)
- Sutton E. Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio* (1899)
- H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (1905)
- Charlotte Perkins Gilmore, *Herland* (1915)
- Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (1932)
- B.F. Skinner, *Walden Two* (1948)
- George Orwell, *1984* (1949)
- Isaac Asimov, *I, Robot* (1950)
- Ayn Rand, *Anthem* (1938) or *Atlas Shrugged* (1957)
- Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* (1963)
- Ursula Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)
- Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (1970)
- Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (1974)
- Samuel Delany, *Dhalgren* (1975)
- J. G. Ballard, *High Rise* (1975)
- Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston* (1975)
- Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976)
- William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984)
- Ursula Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* (1985)
- Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986)
- Kim Stanley Robinson, *Pacific Edge: Three Californias* (1990)
- Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash* (1992)
- Octavia Butler, *Bloodchild* (1995)
- William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition* (2003)
- Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2006).
- Lois Lowry, *The Giver* (2014).
- N. K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (2015)
- Malka Older, *Infomocracy* (2016)

## Films:

- *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951)
- *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)
- *Dr. Strangelove* (1964)
- *Alphaville* (1965)
- *Fahrenheit 451* (1966)
- *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)
- *A Clockwork Orange* (1971)
- *Silent Running* (1972)
- *Westworld* (1973)
- *Logan's Run* (1976)
- *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977)
- *Alien* (1979)
- *Blade Runner* (1982)
- *Starship Troopers* (1997)
- *The Matrix* (1999)
- *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004)
- *Children of Men* (2006)
- *District 9* (2009)
- *The Sixth World* (2012)
- *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)
- *World of Tomorrow* (2015 short)
- *Black Panther* (2018)