

Images of the Future

University of Houston | Summer 2016, online Wednesdays from 5.30 – 8.30 pm CST

Syllabus (will be updated as speakers are confirmed and readings added)

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This course will explore in depth the concept of images of alternative futures – why they are theoretically important in futures studies, where images emerge in society, how they are linked to emerging trends and critical issues of change, how they are used in advertising and politics, etc. Participants will engage in an "image hunt" and in the process develop a taxonomy to aid identifying, categorizing, and analyzing images of the future. One of the key goals of the course is developing participants' own fluency in identifying and synthesizing images of alternative futures for scenario-building and visioning.

Assignments:

- Weekly informal thinkpiece assignments, for contribution to live discussion; together with class engagement, contribute 5% to the overall grade.
- Any **three** of the following four topics, written up as a 2-page brief:
 1. map the predominance of a religious view of the future in the world as represented by the distribution of its believers – describe the religious future;
 2. choose a new political/party or movement and research its growth over the last 5-10 years – describe the future its ideology promises;
 3. choose a technology development scenario and identify indicators of its development; or
 4. choose an environmental scenario and identify indicators of its development -- each are 10% of the final grade, completing three results in a combined total of 30% of the final grade;
- Read one forecast/extrapolative scenario of a critical emerging change along with a related speculative fiction book which portrays the future implied by that trend, and compare (5 pages) -- 20% of final grade;
- Compare two different consultants' scenarios for approach, data and trend use, and presentation (5 pages) -- 20% of final grade;
- Draft three scenarios on the subject of your choice; identify for readers' benefit the assumptions and trends you used, and what indicators should be monitored to evaluate probability of the scenarios (8 pages) -- 25% of final grade.

Formats for each assignment/class activity: specific, detailed descriptions of the format and content required for each assignment to be handed in will be available when it is assigned. As examples, the 2-page brief assignment and the book report format are described below.

Grading:

Submissions are assessed on a five-point scale according to the following criteria –

- 5 = outstanding submission, shows considerable insight and/or proficiency
- 4 = good submission, shows more insight and/or proficiency than required
- 3 = acceptable submission, shows insight and/proficiency required
- 2 = poor submission, shows less insight/proficiency than required
- 1 = failed submission, shows no insight/proficiency

Note – a “5” is equivalent to publishable quality. All assignments will receive feedback focussed on improving the work, and any assignment may be edited and resubmitted for a revision of the grade.

Abilities/Outcomes:

- Master approaches to identifying, classifying, and analyzing images of the future in different format and media;
- Develop a taxonomy of images of the future;
- Establish personal database on scenarios relating to different issues and sectors of society for use in further futures research;
- Practice drafting scenarios of alternative futures;
- Communicate the above clearly to others via discussion, presentation, and writing.

PRE-COURSE PREP

Reading: Polak, Chapters 1 and 2 (pp 1-24) from *The Image of the Future (abridged)*, available online here: <http://en.lapropective.fr/dyn/anglais/memoire/the-image-of-the-future.pdf>.

Thinkpiece: come prepared to describe an image of the future that first captured your attention, or the one that prompted your interest in futures studies.

WEEK 1 | 8 June

Intro to the course – what are images of the future, what do we find interesting about them, and why are they theoretically important?

Readings for next week:

1. Polak, Chapters 1 and 2 (pp 1-24) from *The Image of the Future (abridged)*, available online here: <http://en.lapropective.fr/dyn/anglais/memoire/the-image-of-the-future.pdf>.
2. Ruud van der Helm, “The future according to Frederik Lodewijk Polak: finding the roots of contemporary futures studies”, *Futures* 37 (2005) 505-519
3. Dennis Morgan, “Images of the future: a historical perspective”, *Futures* 34 (2002) 883-893
4. Peter Hayward, “Re-reading Polak: a reply to Morgan”, *Futures* 35 (2003) 807-810
5. Roy Amara, “Views on futures research methodology”, *Futures* July/August (1991) 645-649
6. Jon Turney, “The future in history,” *The Rough Guide to The Future* (2010) 14-35.
7. Robert J. Szczerba, “15 Worst Tech Predictions of All Time”, *Forbes* online.

Thinkpiece: find an interesting image of the future that is more than two centuries old, and be prepared to describe it briefly (ie, in the equivalent of 5 bullet points).

WEEK 2 | 15 June

Topic – ANCIENT AND VARIED IMAGES: how did people in different cultures, in different times, view the future? What did they think was coming? What did they inscribe into their deepest beliefs? What futures are embedded in our politics, philosophies (utopias), economics, architecture, and infrastructure? What questions help us frame these past tomorrows, and analyse them?

Building our visual map / spider diagram.

Readings for next week:

- Vintage Ad Browser, Future Ads <http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/future-ads-1940s>
- Benjamin Noys, "Better Living Through Psychopathology," <http://www.ballardian.com/better-living-through-psychopathology>
- Sherryl Vint, "Introduction to 'The Futures Industry'", Paradoxa vol. 27 <http://paradoxa.com/volumes/27/introduction>
- Corfman and Lynch, "Anticipating the Future: the Role of Consumption Visions in Consumer Behaviour," Advances in Consumer Research vol. 23 <http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/7915/volumes/v23/NA-23>
- Dave Blanchard, "An Alternative Imagination," https://medium.com/@dave_blanchard/an-alternative-imagination-6a59e1071fc5#ie0trqi58

Thinkpiece: find an advertisement – new or old, print or TV or online – that portrays a possible future, and be prepared to share it and briefly analyse it (ie, in the equivalent of 5 bullet points) using our analytic questions.

Assignment: choose three topics among the four suggested (religion, politics, technology, environment) and write a 2-page brief for each (format described in detail below); all three due by 29 June.

WEEK 3 | 22 June

Topic – DESIGN AND MARKET FUTURES: How do designers feed our aspirations? Architects? How do advertisers use the future to encourage us to consume? Are advertising's images of the future utopian? dystopian? A bit of both? What psychological mechanisms do ads invoke with regard to our aspirations? How do ads invoking our futures critique our present?

Guest presenter(s): being scheduled

Readings for next week:

- LeGuin, selection from *The Language of the Night*
- Disch, selection from *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of*
- Selections from *Paradox*
- Selections from *ARC*

Thinkpiece: find a future presented in a movie that is radically different from our present, analyse it using Polak, Verge, or the analytic questions compiled in class, and be prepared to describe it briefly (ie, in the equivalent of 5 bullet points).

Assignment: choose an emerging issue and related science fiction (story / book / movie / TV show) to compare, and explore how an analyst's presentation and exploration of a possible future differs from an artist's; due by 6 July.

WEEK 4 | 29 June

Topic – AMAZING STORIES AND SCIFI: how do writers and artists and graphic novelists, movie and media directors beguile our imaginations with the future? How do they express ideas about change and its impacts on people and societies – and make them seem real?

Guest presenter(s): being scheduled

Readings for next week: In assembly.

Assignment: compare two different consultants' scenarios for approach, data and trend use, and presentation; due by 13 July. *If you need help finding examples, please ask.*

WEEK 5 | 6 July

Topic – TABU TOPICS AND REPULSIVE FUTURES: what are the *tabu* futures? What images repel us? What does that tell us about our implicit assumptions, values, and worldviews? What can neuroscience and psychology tell us about how we imagine, visualize, and interact with images of the future?

Guest presenter(s): Rex Troumbley

Readings for next week:

- Bishop, Hines, and Collins, "The current state of scenario development: an overview of techniques"
- Curry and Schultz, "Roads Less Travelled: Different Methods, Different Stories"
- Natural England Scenarios Compendium, <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/41011>

Thinkpiece: find an interesting image of the future that is more than two centuries old, and be prepared to describe it briefly (ie, in the equivalent of 5 bullet points).

WEEK 6 | 13 July

Topic – FABRICATING FUTURES: analysts and futurists and designers: how are our colleagues creating futures? what kind of stories do various scenario building methods give us? How does the output differ? How does the experience of those futures differ?

Guest presenter(s): being scheduled

Readings for next week: being assembled

Assignment: draft three scenarios on the subject of your choice; identify for readers' benefit the assumptions and trends you used, and what indicators should be monitored to evaluate probability of the scenarios (8-10 pages); due for presentation and feedback 20 July; written final due by 22 July.

WEEK 7 | 20 July

Topic – FABRICATION COMPLETE: sharing our scenarios. what have we learned? Using our analytic framework on our own scenarios – does that improve them?

ALL ASSIGNMENTS MUST BE HANDED IN BY 22 JULY

ASSIGNMENTS IN DETAIL

THREE 2-PAGE BRIEFS ON AN EXISTING IMAGE OF THE FUTURE

This assignment asks you to explore any *three* of the following four topics, each written up as a 2-page brief:

- map the predominance of a religious view of the future in the world as represented by the distribution of its believers, and describe the future implied by the religion;
- choose a new political/party or movement and research its growth over the last 5-10 years, and describe the future its ideology promises;
- choose a specific technology development scenario and identify indicators of its development; or
- choose an environmental scenario and identify indicators of its development.

In each case, introduce why you choose the topic and subject you did (eg, why that particular religion, or a given political party and ideology. Briefly describe the source of the image (provide a citation for the source material), ie, the religion, the political movement, the new technology, or the environmental change. Then briefly catalog the indicators of that image's growth, for example:

- religion's future – the growth in the number of believers, and where they are;
- political ideology's future – growth in party members, or people affiliated with the political movement (eg, growth in number of voters registering for the Green Party);
- technology's future – crowdfunding campaign, or raising investment capital; or bought up by major corporation, or passed regulatory hurdle (eg, Pebble Kickstarter campaign);
- environmental future – statistics showing the environmental change is occurring, or observations (eg, coral die-off in the Great Barrier Reef)

Finally, summarise the image of the future implied by either the religion, the political party, the technological innovation, or the environmental change. Be concise: two pages total for each topic.

Each brief is worth 10% of the final grade, completing three results in a combined total of 30% of the final grade.

BOOK REPORTS COMPARING SCENARIO WITH SCIENCE FICTION (5-7 pages)

Header: Author. *Name of the Book*. Place published: publisher, date of publication. Number of pages. Please provide this information for both the non-fiction document and the fiction document. IF the science fiction story is a movie, then provide: Director. *Name of the Movie*. Production company, date of premiere.

Body/non-fiction: After stating all the pertinent information listed above, a non-fiction book review should contain *at least* a paragraph (conventionally at least four sentences long) on each of the following:

1. Why did you pick this book to review (liked the cover? friend recommended it? threw darts at the book list? came to you in a dream?);
2. Brief explanation of the idea or argument the author is making about the world, trends in change, crises, or whatever (please include a mention of how or where facts were obtained to support this argument);
3. Implications: the author is, presumably, describing some startling change or crisis situation. What changes does this imply for social systems? political systems? economic systems? technology? the environment? what else? you will need to think about this in order to compare the author's implications with the details offered by the artists' scenario offered in the speculative fiction work you have chosen.
4. Was the book interesting, well-written, and did you enjoy it? Why or why not?

Body/speculative fiction: a fiction book review should contain *at least* a paragraph (conventionally at least four sentences long) on each of the following:

1. Again, briefly explain why you chose this book (presumably, because you thought it represented a scenario linked to the non-fiction book you chose);
2. Brief summary of the plot or narrative: this will certainly take more than one paragraph, but should take less than five -- do, however, mention crucial information like the main character's name, where and when the action takes place, etc.;
3. Describe as best you can, from what the author describes outright or implies, a) what system of governance exists in this future; b) what the characteristics of the economic system are (production, distribution, currency); c) any really startling social innovations (people are all one gender; nobody can hear; everyone has an extra set of thumbs; group marriage covenants; etc.
4. Finally, did the author write the story well? Did you enjoy the book itself? Why or why not?

Conclusion: What has the artist communicated that the analyst did not? What were the most riveting details (i.e., details that caught your fancy, totally revolted you, or otherwise snapped you to attention) the artist extrapolated from the patterns of change suggested by the analyst? What weaknesses or logical inconsistencies can you find in the artist's scenario?

This looks like requirements for a twenty-page paper, but trust me, it isn't. Be concise; try just sketching succinctly the authors' key thoughts and your impressions. YOUR IMPRESSIONS are critical -- and don't just say you like or didn't like some aspect of this future, say WHY. Be as specific as possible; citing descriptive phrases from the work helps.

Examples of trend analyses with matched speculative fiction:

analysis /// speculative fiction

environmental holocaust:

CARSON, Rachel. *Silent Spring*

/// BRUNNER, John. *The Sheep Look Up*

feminist social reconstruction:

EISLER, Riane. *The Chalice and the Blade*

/// TEPPER, Sheri S. *The Gate to Women's Country*

OR BRIN, David *Glory Season*

religious fundamentalism:

MOJTABAI, A.G. *Blessed Assurance: at home with the bomb in Amarillo, Texas*

/// ATWOOD, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale* [book or movie]

OR *The Rapture* [movie]

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

Academic honesty policy All UH students are responsible for knowing the standards of academic honesty. Please refer to the UH catalog. Plagiarism, using research without citations or using a created production (such as other people's words) without quotations or citations, will result in a grade penalty or failure of the course. Internet sources must be credited according to the sites recommended citation guideline if available. If no citation guideline is provided by the web source, then the date, URL site owner, and author must be included with the web material used.

Disabilities: If you have a disability and need a special accommodation consult first with the Coordinator of Health Disabilities Services,

Incompletes: A grade of "I" is given only in cases of documented emergency or special circumstances late in the semester, provided that the student has been making satisfactory progress. An Incomplete Grade Contract must be completed.

Withdrawals: Refer to class schedule for dates to withdraw without evaluation from a course.

One more thing: I am a compulsive editor, and it is possible that your assignments will be returned to you with red corrections all over it. THIS WILL IN NO WAY AFFECT YOUR GRADE,

WHICH IS BASED SOLELY ON CONTENT. On the other hand, experience tells me that salable skills in business include the ability to write clearly, logically, and, where possible, elegantly. This editing service is extended as an aid to improving your writing skills.