the future is not what it used to be...

POL 672 Fall 2015
Prof. J Grove
Saunders 624

Contemporary politics suffers from an affliction of an eternal present. Talk of the future appears dated, a relic of a lost idealistic intellectual movement that sought utopias. In the rubble of geodesic domes, space elevators, and personal jetpacks humanity is hurdling towards its highly anticipated destruction with a ho hum ethos matched only by the shrill histrionics of those few publicly committed trying to save us. The popular face of Futures now mostly haunts the halls of Silicon Valley, Wall Street, and the Department of Defense. The pages of Wired Magazine are filled with the apocalyptic visions of DARPA’s war machines or Elon Musk’s most recent gadget rather than the bold systemic thinking of H.G. Wells and Isaac Asimov. In the face of the tyranny of TINA (There is No Alternative!) Alternative Futures seeks to intensify the anticipatory tendencies of transformative political thinking. Rather than accept catastrophe or forever capitalism as a given, Alternative Futures tries to disrupt the path dependencies of current political thinking. To this end, Alternative Futures is in favor of a more participatory and collaborative design of new worlds that might sneak out of the historical cul-de-sac of our neoliberal moment. This class will to teach you to use images of the future, scenario building, and speculative thinking to disrupt the hegemonic images of the future foisted upon us by cadres of professional prognosticators. The class will start from the presumption that we can tear down the vapid façade or positivist statistical predictions without giving up on political interventions that try to steer our species towards preferred futures. The readings will explore the traditions of The Manoa School Alternative Futures, Afro-Futurism, post-punk critical theory, cosmic pessimism, accelerationist thinking, world design, cybernetics, and the flawed metaphysics of prediction and statistical inference.
Reading List

Bertrand de Jouvenel—The Art of Conjecture

Buckminster Fuller—Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth

Michel Callon—Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy

James Lorimer—Wildlife in the Anthropocene

Ytasha Womack—Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture

David Roden—Posthuman Life

Eugene Thacker—Cosmic Pessimism

Invisible Committee—To Our Friends

Stafford Beer—Designing Freedom

Edward A. Shanken—Systems

Nick Bostrom—Superintelligence

Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams—Inventing the Future

Elie Ayache—The Black Swan: The End of Probability

Steven Shaviro—No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism
Class Schedule

Anticipating Prediction
Week 1 Anticipating Change
Bertrand de Jouvenel, The Art of Conjecture

Week 2 The Problem of Prediction
Elie Ayache, The Black Swan: The End of Probability

Week 3 Alternative Futures
James Dator Reader

Week 4 Speculative Thinking
Steven Shaviro, No Speed Limit
Williams and Srnicek, #ACCELERATE

Futures of Governmentality
Week 5 Systems Thinking
Edward Shanken-Systems

Week 6 Steering
Buckminster Fuller-Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth

Week 7 Designing Democracy
Stafford Beer-Designing Freedom

Week 8 Governing
Michel Callon-Acting in an Uncertain World

Week 9 Futures After Anarchy
Invisible Committee, To Our Friends
Week 10 Bringing the Future Back In
Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, Inventing the Future

Week 11 The Future is Black
Ytasha Womack, Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture

Agents Provocateur
Week 12 The Problem of Natures
James Lorimer-Wildlife in the Anthropocene
Stewart Brand et all-Ecomodernist Manifesto

Week 13 Humans After the Human
David Roden-Posthuman Life

Week 14 Other Intelligences
Nick Bostrom-Superintelligence

NO FUTURE
Week 15 The Problem of Pessimism
Eugene Thacker-Cosmic Pessimism
Thomas Ligotti-Conspiracy Against the Human Race