

Dystopian Fiction, Horror, and Politics

POL 290, Spring 2022

Tuesday, Wednesday & Thursday 9 am - 12 pm

Dr. Zoila Ponce de Leon

Office hours: Tuesday 12-2 pm & Wednesday 12-1 pm and by appointment

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Course Description

This course examines the political commentary included in dystopian fiction and horror novels and films. Through the analysis of seminal novels such as *1984* and *Brave New World*, and more recent films such as *Snowpiercer* and *US*, the class will assess different political concepts, including power, government, freedom, and equality. Literature and film can offer the most mesmerizing yet frightening depictions of our present and future world. At the same time, they can provide us with the opportunity to critically compare our contemporary experiences to those portrayed in them. Our main goal will be to critically assess the role of the government and powerful actors in our society. We will complement our analysis with a variety of academic readings and opinion pieces.

Course Requirements

The course will meet three times a week. The requirements for the course are class attendance, reading of the assigned materials, and active participation in class discussions.

If you need to miss class, send me a quick note ahead of the class session you must miss. Classes missed immediately before and after holidays are particularly noticed. I expect everyone to **arrive on time**. Late arrivals are extremely disruptive. I appreciate your cooperation.

Contact me if you have questions or concerns. If you have any kind of problem with the course or with life, please **communicate** with me (no need to give me any specific details regarding the situation you are going through). I am willing to work with you to help you succeed, but I cannot do so retroactively at the end of the term.

You are required to have all course-related files saved on an **online drive** of your preference (i.e., Dropbox, Google Drive, or others).

Students are expected to come to each session **ready for a lively discussion**. The following are some guidelines to help you get started:

- **Speak up!** Ask the second you have a question or a comment. It is very possible that others may have the same queries you do.
- **Respect** one another. Differences of opinion are likely and desirable. **Listen** to your peers' questions and comments and express your disagreements with respect.

- **No cellphones in class.**
- **Stick to pen and paper** to take notes. In exceptional cases, tablets or laptops may be employed only for valid educational reasons related to the course. Violations will affect your grade and preclude further use of the device in class.

Course Evaluation

Participation	25%
Leading discussion	15%
Short reaction	10%
Short script	50%

Short script grade breakdown:

<i>Summary & outline</i>	10%
<i>Script</i>	20%
<i>Video presentation</i>	20%

Grade Assessment

Grades reflect the following assessment of your work:

A: Excellent performance (90-100). Exceptional grasp of the material and a deep analytic understanding of the subject.

B: Good performance (80-89). Mastering the material, understanding the subject well, and showing some originality of thought and/or considerable effort

C: Fair performance (70-79). Acceptable understanding of the material, but not succeeding in translating this understanding into consistently creative or original work.

D: Poor performance (60-69). Some understanding of the material but exhibiting significant deficiency in comprehension and/or effort.

F: Fail (59 and below). Failing to complete assignments or to comprehend the basics of the material.

Minus grades at each increment are below 63, 73, 83, and 93, and plus grades above 67.9, 77.9, and 87.9. I don't round up .5 grades. In other words, 87.5 is not a B+ and 89.5 is not an A-.

There are no extra credit assignments in this course. If you have concerns about your grade in the course, please come talk to me as soon as possible about strategies to improve your performance.

Re-grading: **I do not discuss grades via email.** Please take 24 hours to review the initial feedback. Then, bring to my office a written note explaining the error that you think I made.

Participation

Participation is key for this course. Students are expected to read the assigned materials before each session and **participate actively** during class meetings. It is essential that you come to class prepared so that you can engage in discussion and ask questions.

Participation performance is not based on the number of times you speak up during class but on the **quality** of your input. By no means, this should be understood as having to “be right” every time. Comments or questions that contribute to our analysis of course contents and discussion are highly regarded. Questions are an excellent way to participate; they show your interest in the course and your ability for critical thought.

Leading Discussion

Each student must select one session to lead the discussion. You will prepare two or three discussion topics or questions. Students will make their choices in the first session. Discussion leaders must be prepared to lead an engaging discussion, introducing and explaining what they take to be the most important topics or themes of the assigned readings.

Short Reaction

You will provide an oral reaction offering some **commentary** on the session’s assigned readings or film. You should critically evaluate any of the topics presented. This short reaction **should not summarize** the readings or film, but rather critically discuss their central themes, compare to other readings done for our class and highlight their strengths and weaknesses. Students will choose topics for these short reaction in the first seminar session.

You **cannot** offer your reaction during the session in which you are a discussion leader.

Short Script & Presentation

Students must work on a short script for an alternative ending to any of the novels or films assigned for the course. You may work on this project in groups of three, in pairs, or individually. This should be an original, single act script or screenplay, and be approximately 10 pages and 12-point font. This assignment is due on Thursday, **May 19th**.

By Thursday, **May 5th**, students will have established their respective groups and met to discuss the assignment. During that week, you should take some time to start working on your short script. During our session on May 5th, you’ll have a chance to ask me any questions you may have as you work on it.

A **working summary** and an **outline** of your short script are due on Sunday, **May 8th**. The summary should be one or two paragraphs briefly discussing the alternative ending you have in mind and stating the inspiration behind your idea. The outline should provide more details regarding the characters involved and the development of the alternative ending. I will return this assignment with comments. You should incorporate this feedback into your next assignment.

You will also prepare a short video presentation (3-5 minutes) of your script. You should upload it to Canvas on Friday, **May 20th**. You will be required to comment (Canvas *Discussions*) on at least two presentations.

You will be assessed on 1) clarity, 2) novelty, and 3) ability to reach the audience.

Honor System

For all course work, the [Honor System](#) applies. You need to familiarize yourself with the concept and practice of *plagiarism* to make sure that you avoid it. From the Catalog: “*Plagiarism describes the use of another’s words or ideas without proper acknowledgment. The*

students of Washington and Lee University have considered plagiarism a violation of the Honor System; therefore, all forms of plagiarism including Internet plagiarism are taken very seriously. Plagiarism takes many forms, including the wholesale copying of phrases or texts, or the use of ideas without indicating the source."

Ask me if you have any questions. Leyburn Library has helpful advice on [avoiding plagiarism](#).

Disability Accommodations

Washington and Lee University makes reasonable academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. All accommodations must be approved through the Office of the Dean of the College. Students requesting accommodations for this course should present an official accommodation letter within the first two weeks of the term and schedule a meeting outside of class time to discuss accommodations. It is the student's responsibility to present this paperwork in a timely fashion and to follow up about accommodation arrangements.

Diversity Statement

Washington and Lee affirms that diverse perspectives and backgrounds enhance our community. We are committed to the recruitment, enrichment, and retention of students, faculty, and staff who embody many experiences, cultures, points of view, interests, and identities. As engaged citizens in a global and diverse society, we seek to advance a positive learning and working environment for all through open and substantive dialogue. Please read the [Politics Department Statement on Diversity and Inclusion](#).

[Policy on Prohibited Discrimination](#)

The University prohibits and this policy addresses discrimination, including harassment, on the basis of race, color, religion, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, veteran's status, and genetic information in its educational programs and activities and with regard to employment. Additionally, the University prohibits retaliation against any individual who brings a good faith complaint under this policy or is involved in the complaint process. Students, faculty, and staff found to have violated this policy will be disciplined appropriately, up to and including termination from employment or dismissal from the University.

[Sexual Discrimination & Misconduct Policy](#)

W&L prohibits all forms of sexual misconduct-which includes sexual harassment, non-consensual sexual intercourse, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual exploitation, domestic and dating violence, and stalking-and retaliation. This policy provides guidance to assist those who have experienced or been affected by sexual misconduct, whether as a complainant, a respondent, or a third party. It includes detailed information about what conduct is prohibited, confidential and reporting resources, and resolution procedures.

Important dates

May 5	Discussion of Script Ideas
May 8	Short Script Summary & Outline
May 19	Short Script
May 20	Video Presentation

Course Books & Films

We will read 3 books during the term:

- 1) *Brave New World*, by Aldous Huxley.
- 2) *1984*, by George Orwell.
- 3) *The Power*, by Naomi Alderman.

We will watch 2 films:

- 1) *Snowpiercer*, by Bong Joon Ho and Kelly Masterson.
- 2) *US*, by Jordan Peele.

I will post all the remaining required readings on Canvas, which you should **read after** reading the assigned part of the novel/watching the film.

Course Schedule & Readings

Please note that I reserve the right to make changes to the course schedule, including assignments due dates, when unforeseen circumstances occur.

Week 1

April 26: Course Overview & Discussion Leader Assignments

April 27: *Brave New World*

- Ch. 1-4

April 28: *Brave New World*

- Ch. 5-8
- Margaret Atwood, "Everybody is happy now," *The Guardian*.

Week 2

May 3: *Brave New World*

- Ch. 9-18

May 4: *Snowpiercer*

May 5: *Snowpiercer* & Discussion of Script Ideas

- Emily VanDerWerff, "Sci-fi movie *Snowpiercer* is one of the most political films of the year," *Vox*.

May 8: Short Script Summary & Outline (Canvas)

Week 3

May 10: *1984*

- Parts I & II

May 11: *1984*

- Part III
- "A Letter to George Orwell," by Aldous Huxley (October 21, 1949).

May 12: *US*

Week 4

May 17: *US & The Power*, pages 1-201

- Tasha Robinson, "Jordan Peele's *US* turns a political statement into unnerving horror," *The Verge*.

May 18: *The Power*, pages 202-372

- Sophie Gilbert, "What if women had *The Power*?" *The Atlantic*.

May 19: Last Meeting

Short Script (Canvas)

May 20: Video Presentation (Canvas)