

Future Politics

Version of 14/11/2025

(DRAFT)

PS 374 Fall 2025

Instructor Info —



Jake Bowers



Office Hours Appointments:

<http://calendly.com/jakebowers>



Office hours: Zoom or 432 DKH



<http://jakebowers.org>



jwbowers@illinois.edu

Course Info —



Tues & Thurs



11:00 – 12:20 CT



316S Mumford Hall (and sometimes Zoom)

Overview

How can imagining the future help us understand the present? How does considering the future help us think critically about politics today? In this course we will read social science and political philosophy together with science fiction in an attempt to enhance the political, social and economic imagination of the social sciences by building our own imaginations as students of social science. The future hopes and imaginings of past political thinkers do not include either enough detail or enough information about our rapidly changing technological, social, political, and economic landscape to provide us with enough practice to confidently confront the future as it happens to us. Science fiction provide a detailed view of life in alternative futures, and the writers that we choose to read here tend to think seriously and logically about how current cutting-edge technology might have social and political ramifications — however, science fiction authors are also mostly focusing on plot, characters and narrative and thus may skim over core concepts that ought to organize our thinking about politics and society. Thus, we read both together in order to practice theoretically informed futurism (which is not the same as prediction or forecasting, but is more like practicing confronting the unexpected).

I think of a college seminar as a kind of guided self-study group. The students arrive because they are interested in a topic broadly and want to read and write and think and share ideas with each other. The professor helps focus the reading and discussion: I have read more of these pieces than you have, and I have given some extra thought to the question about how participants in a self-study group might get the most from their participation in such a group. To this end, this course offers multiple opportunities for reflection and engagement with the material: if you don't get it the first time, you'll have multiple opportunities to work to get it.

Learning Objectives

- Practice imagining alternative political, social, and economic futures. It is too easy to imagine future technology and too hard to imagine future political parties and constitutions and systems of taxation and corporate governance. This class aims to help you practice this kind of social, political, economic imagining.
- Engage with science fiction novels, stories, graphic novels, and movies that attempt to do this kind of task — to imagine different politics, societies, and economies. (Using the discussion questions, in-class discussion, and your own reading.)
- Engage with political philosophers who provide some frameworks for thinking about politics, society and economics that you can use to inform and structure your imagining. (Using the discussion questions, in-class discussion, and your own reading.)
- Engage with non-fiction and commentary about possible future politics, economics, and society. (Using the discussion questions, in-class discussion, and your own reading.)
- Practice creating your own scenarios or prototypes for future politics, economics and society. (Using the three assigned projects.)

Goals and Expectations

You will read *both* a science fiction novel *and* a short piece of political philosophy or other bit of non-fiction almost every week (scheduled to occur over a weekend for discussion on Tuesdays and for use in small group discussions on Thursdays). Sometimes I will assign a movie or perhaps a short story instead of a novel. I hope that the fiction can help us talk more clearly about and/or understand more deeply the political theory or non-fiction social scientific work.

I am imagining that we will all talk together on Tuesdays for the whole classtime about the readings assigned for discussion that day. Then on Thursdays, we will start the time with any questions you may have remaining about the readings and then you will break into small groups to brainstorm and prototype some scenarios or design fiction, and then each group will report back to the overall class for discussion. The emphasis on Thursday is on **creating new ideas based on the readings that we talked about on Tuesdays.**

These ideas about how the course goes could change as the course develops during the term.

In order for you and your colleagues to get the most out of this class, I have designed the following requirements:

Attendance

I require regular attendance. I will consider an absence excused if you have an appropriate note from a dean, doctor, or lawyer. See [the official University policy on absences](#). You may have three unexcused absences this term after the first week of classes. Other absences will count as zeros in your in-class involvement grade.

We have some Zoom classes scheduled when I will be out of town. I will expect you to have your video on during the Zoom classes except during breaks unless you talk with me about the reasons why you cannot have your video on.

Involvement/Participation

Quality class participation does not mean “talking a lot.” It includes turning in assignments on time; attending classes; arriving on time; thinking and caring about the material and expressing your thoughts respectfully and succinctly in class.

The best in-class participation that I have seen has come from people who read carefully and then listen closely to their classmates and respond thoughtfully (if possibly critically or supportively). This class is not a place to make speeches. Nor is it a place to sit in silence. You get credit for daring to guess or giving unexpected answers. Although I will call for volunteers to answer the questions I pose, I will probably call on you if you consistently don’t raise your hand or if you keep avoiding my gaze.

If you have ideas about how to organize and stimulate in-class discussion, please let me know. I’m always open to learning how to improve a classroom experience.

Short Projects: Scenarios or Design Fictions

Although most of the course involves close engagement with reading and topics defined here in the syllabus, I want you to have a chance to engage with the material on your own as well as a place to practice using your imagination on your own. I will ask that you produce 3 short projects throughout the term. I envision that these project would be [design fictions](#) or [speculative prototypes](#) of some kinds — in which you write a short essay or produce a short podcast or video from the perspective of a future in such a way that we learn about that future and its upsides and downsides. For example you could write as if you lived in some future — perhaps writing a letter to a friend, or could write the platform for a future political party (or a letter or report about an experience with a political party, a candidate, an election), or something else (a comic, a short video, for a podcast see for example the [Flash Forward](#) podcast for a series of short fictions (less than 5 mins long) that start many episodes.). For examples of such written work, see the [Op-ed from the future series of the New York Times](#). For a video version see [Kim Stanley Robinson's video message from 2071](#).

I also expect that each creative project comes with a 1 page single-spaced piece of writing where you explain how one or more of the political theory readings or nonfiction readings from the class (or that you bring in from outside the class) informed your choices in the design fiction. This is the social science or political theory "explainer" for the project.

Design and lead a week

Students will have the chance to design and lead a week of the class either individually or as a group. Each group or individual should sign up for a week in advance (usually within the first two weeks of class) and submit a proposal to the professor a month in advance of the week. The proposal can also be a discussion in a Zoom or in-person meeting (see the link for office hours above).

Those who design and lead a week should: (1) Choose a piece of fiction that illustrates some interesting ideas about politics, economics, society, and/or culture, (2) Choose a piece of nonfiction that articulates some arguments about those ideas,

introduces and explains something about those ideas, or illustrates or provides background on the technology itself (or something else, sometimes it is hard to find a good non-fiction pair for a piece of fiction), (3) Come up with one or more scenario prompts for the class to work on during a Thursday class (if, as class designers, you want to continue the idea of having Tuesday classes focus on readings/materials and Thursday classes focus on creation), (4) Lead the class sessions (The professor will take attendance and keep track of who is participating, and is also happy to be a moderator if that is useful, or happy to be a class participant.)

Presentation

The last week or so of the course will be devoted to presentations of one of your three scenarios or design fictions to the rest of the class. You can choose which one you want to present. I currently imagine that each person will have roughly 10 minutes to present using slides or some other presentation tool followed by 10 minutes of discussion, but we could change this if we wanted to increase the time devoted to presentations. If you use slides, I suggest using approximately 5 slides.

Grading

I'm currently planning to calculate your grade this way: 25% for Attendance/Class Participation, 65% scenarios or design fictions or designing and leading a week (each project or class design/leading about $65/3 \approx 21\frac{2}{3}\%$), 10% Presentation. Leading a week (in a group or alone) can be substituted for one of the projects. So, if you choose to design and lead a week, you would only have to turn in 2 projects. If you choose not to design and lead a week, you have three projects.

I calculate grades myself so any grades automatically combined on Canvas will probably not be correct.

I do not curve. If all of you perform excellently, then I will say so to the computer system of the University. That said, I am a hard grader with very high standards: I have never given all As, or even mostly As. I hope I can assign all A's this term.

All written work in this class will assume familiarity with the principles of good writing in (Becker, 1986). If you do not know why one should avoid the passive voice, ask me in class or in office hours and I will post relevant chapters from Becker on the topic.

There will be only one extra credit opportunity for the class. Successful participation in the Political Science Subject Pool is worth 2 percentage points (to the overall course grade). An announcement with more details will be made in class in September.

Conduct

I expect you to observe the [University of Illinois Campus Code of Conduct](#) when writing your papers (and in general). So, for example, I expect that you will use the words of others, including generative AI, without proper attribution. Violations will lead to a failing grade for that assignment. If you have any questions about what counts as plagiarism, ask the professor.

On the use of Generative AI

Tools for generative AI will be a part of our futures so we should not avoid them. Yet, if you rely on them too much, they rob you of the ability to grow as a person, to practice imagining something new, to practice communicating via writing, to practice thinking. Consider the difference between learning to play a musical instrument or to play a sport or to learn to cook versus listening to music, watching sports, or eating a restaurant. Both the act of creation and the act of appreciation are worthy. Yet, without creators and makers doing the hard work of practicing and growing and making mistakes and learning from their mistakes, no one can do the appreciating.

This class aims to help prepare you to be a creator of new ideas in the face of rapid social, economic, cultural, and climate change. When rapid change occurs, you will need all of the tools you can get your hands on, and generative AI will be among those tools. But those tools alone will not create the new ideas that will be the difference between human suffering and human flourishing during moments of crisis.

So, if you use ChatGPT or other AI tools, I expect you to cite them unless you are only using them as proofreaders for your writing or you are using them to learn how to make a podcast, or make whatever object you are making. We would do the same if we used another resource — a website, an article, a book. So, it makes sense for you to also cite these tools when you use them.

Diversity and Inclusivity

I expect that all members of this class contribute to a respectful, welcoming and inclusive environment for every other member of the class.

Students with disabilities

Contact me as soon as possible (and definitely within the first 2 weeks of class) to request any accommodations needed.

Emergency Response Instructions

University policy is Run, Hide, Fight.

Computing and Writing

Your design ideas / prototypes can be turned in as pdf documents or shared with me as Google Docs (or using Box documents or Dropbox Paper) — or if they are multimedia, in some other appropriate format. I do not want to download Word documents.

Please do not turn in Word documents.

Class Schedule

8/26(Tue) Introductions

Today we will discuss why science fiction might be usefully paired with political philosophy and social science as a way to deepen and broaden our thinking about politics, society and the economy. Here is one answer to this question provided by Paul Krugman: "...what drew me to science fiction, more than four decades ago — before I got into economics, and in fact part of the reason I went into economics — was a certain kind of possibility: the creation of fictional worlds, different from our own but not too different, as a way to play with ideas about who we are and where we're going. And I do mean "play" — not being too serious, mixing ideas about society, economics, politics, and so on with derring-do and romance is crucial to keeping things light enough to tolerate." ([Quoted in "Salon Link"](#))

See also:

- ["Paul Krugman: Asimov's Foundation novels grounded my economics"](#)
 - [Economics ought to read more science fiction](#)
 - [The freedom to speculate about consequences](#)
 - [The need for utopias](#)
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Scenarios, Design Fiction, Speculative Fiction

8/28(Thu)	Introduction to Speculative Fiction & Design Fiction Key questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do people mean when they talk about "design fiction", "science fiction prototyping", or "speculative fiction"?• How might design fiction help us react to unexpected events? Or make better political or economic or social or cultural institutions?	Come to class prepared to discuss: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Wikipedia Article on Design Fiction• Patently untrue: fleshy defibrillators and synchronised baseball are changing the future• This short video as an example piece of design fiction Unvited Guests• Extra: Science Fiction Prototyping Wikipedia Entry
9/2(Tue)	Democratic Futures Key questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Did the design fictions make you think differently about current voting institutions? Why or why not?• What consequences can you imagine for moves to lower the voting age and/or implement direct democracy?• Are there normative arguments for or against either of the proposals that we should be considering?	Come to class prepared to discuss the following podcasts and essays: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listen to Everybody Votes• Listen to Swipe Right for Democracy• Read lowering the voting age• Read age-weighted voting
9/4(Thu)	Democracy Scenario Workshop	You will work in groups to create a scenario based on the readings and theme of the week: democracy, participation, citizenship.

9/9(Tue)	Scenarios and Futurism Key questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What does Cascio suggest are key methods for making effective future scenarios?• How does a scenario made by a futurist relate to a design fiction?• Can we apply Cascio's approach to either the voting example of last week or the example of elderly people and the internet of things from Uninvited Guests?	Come to class prepared to discuss reflections on futurism and the creation of scenarios from Jamais Cascio <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read: Future Thinking: Basics• Read: Future Thinking: Asking Questions• Read: Future Thinking: Scanning the World• Read: Future Thinking: Mapping Possibilities 1• Read: Future Thinking: Mapping Possibilities 2• Read: Future Thinking: Writing Scenarios• Read: Future Thinking: Three Possible Economic Models 1• Read: Future Thinking: Three Possible Economic Models 2• Extra: FYI, Future Thinking: Bibliography• Extra: Podcast 'I build a world with fantasy master N.K. Jemisin'• Extra: The Purpose of Science Fiction: How it teaches governments—and citizens—how to understand the future of technology.• Extra: Utopia (The need for utopias)• Extra: Tomorrow Matters: Ignoring the Future Is Undermining the Present• Extra: The Climate Case for a Jobs Guarantee by Kim Stanley Robinson• Extra: Other bloomberg essays by Kim Stanley Robinson
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9/11(Thu)	Design Fiction Workshop	Focus on scenarios
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Political and Moral Economics

9/16(Tue)	The Political Economy Key questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Imagine that the Robinson book is like a class project. What are the drivers? What are the consequences? (For example, how does he imagine a solution to the problem of "financial capitalism"? What is the problem for him?)• What is the problem with debt and neoliberalism or "financial capitalism" (as compared to older versions of capitalism) as described in "Company of One"? (You can think about student debt if that is useful.)	Come to class prepared to discuss: Kim Stanley Robinson (2017). <i>New York 2140</i> . Orbit <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read: Company of One: The Fate of Democracy in an Age of Neoliberalism• Extra: Listen to Podcast on Governing by Debt by Maurizio Lazzarato.• Extra: Read Review: Maurizio Lazzarato's Governing by Debt, by Moritz Altenried• Extra: Read The Coronavirus Is Rewriting Our Imaginations by Kim Stanley Robinson• Extra: TBA Chapters from Federica Carugati and Margaret Levi (2021). <i>A moral political economy: Present, past, and future.</i> Cambridge University Press• Extra: FYI on an alternative vision of prisons, see the Norwegian prisons 9min short: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IepJqxRCZY (note that the last 1 minute shows prison guards in the USA abusing a prisoner).
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9/18(Thu)	Political Economy Workshop
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Social Reproduction and Control

9/23(Tue)	Surveillance and Control Key questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is a "disciplinary society"? How does Foucault (and Bentham) think that surveillance can control society? What are versions of surveillance that are more subtle than cameras but that still appear to control people?• What does Doctorow propose as an alternative or methods of resistance to these kinds of social control? Why does Doctorow value privacy so much? What is the point of privacy as a social value or even natural right?• What are the drivers and consequences of Doctorow's world?	C. Doctorow (2008). <i>Little Brother</i> . Tor Teen (download for free from http://craphound.com/littlebrother/)
9/25(Thu)	Surveillance and Sous-veillance Workshop	Michel Foucault (1995). <i>Discipline & Punish : The Birth of the Prison (Vintage)</i> . Reprint. Vintage. isbn: 0679752552 Chapter on "Panopticism"
9/30(Tue)	Surveillance and Control Key questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the social/political problems of prediction? What are some examples? Why do we feel like some of them are not disturbing and others are?• Can we ensure that behavioral change is in the interests of the person?• How should we regulate and/or control and/or just embrace and adapt to our new abilities to predict (using sensors and algorithms) and control (using social and behavioral science).	Maybe a polling expert's memo; A prison design; A new system for behavior management in schools; A plan to nudge people to comply with COVID vaccination, testing, mask wearing, and social distancing. Watch the movie <i>Minority Report</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read: This year's economics Nobel winner invented a tool that's both brilliant and undemocratic (pdf in canvas)• Read: Xi Jinping's Recipe for Total Control: An Army of Eyes and Ears (pdf in canvas)• Read: Assessing China's "National Model" Social Credit System (pdf in canvas)• Extra: Four Takeaways From a Times Investigation Into China's Expanding Surveillance State (pdf in canvas)• Extra: Trusting by Numbers: An Analysis of a Chinese Social Credit System Governance Infrastructure• Extra: Inside China's Vast New Experiment in Social Ranking (pdf in canvas)• Read: How the West Got China's Social Credit System Wrong (pdf in canvas)• Extra: Watch Richard Thaler's Nobel Prize Speech
10/2(Thu)	(Maybe on your own or out of class) Behavioral Control Workshop	Nudge units, Social credit, etc.

The Material World and Human Society and Politics

10/7(Tue)	No Class
10/9(Thu)	No Class
10/10(Fri)	Project/Paper 1 Due by 11:59pm

10/14(Tue)	Scarcity and Society 1	E. Callenbach (1990). <i>Ecotopia</i> . Bantam Books B. Ollman (1977). "Marx's Vision of communism a reconstruction". In: <i>Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory</i> 8.1, pp. 4–41
10/16(Thu)	Scarcity and Society Workshop 1	
10/21(Tue)	The Future of Fascism (Student Led Week: Navin) Key questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is "Fascism"?• Why would people support a fascist government? Are• When is violence justified? When is it not justified?• How is an unrealistic piece of fiction useful, or not, for us to improve our imaginations?	Watch V for Vendetta Read the Wikipedia entry on Fascism https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fascism
10/23(Thu)	The Future of Fascism Workshop 1	
10/28(Tue)	Anarchy, Oligarchy, Utopias	Ursula K Le Guin (2003). <i>The Dispossessed</i> . Harper Perennial Modern Classics Read: Kim Stanley Robinson (2016). "Dispossessed". Unpublished Manuscript (I think written in 2016 but not 100% sure).
10/30(Thu)	Anarchy, Oligarchy, Utopias Workshop	
11/4(Tue)	Race and Capitalism (Student Led Week: Averhy and Chaiya) Key Questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why would people talk about "racial capitalism" rather than just "capitalism" (in either industrial or neoliberal varieties)?• What is "commodification" and what does it have to do with race?• In the movie, is Monk justified for profiting from stereotypes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Watch American Fiction• Read What does Nancy Leong mean by "racial capitalism"? https://harvardlawreview.org/print/vol-126/racial-capitalism/.• Extra: What Did Cedric Robinson Mean by "Racial Capitalism"• Extra: Racial Capitalism• Extra: To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice• Extra: What Marx Got Wrong About Capitalism: A Racial Capitalism Reading List• Extra: Toward a Global History of White Supremacy
11/6(Thu)	Race and Capitalism Workshop	

11/11(Tue)	<p>Climate, Finance, Politics (Student Led Week: Sam and Jasmine and Kayla)</p> <p>Reading questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does age play a role in environmental issues (climate change, littering, deforestation, plastic waste, etc)? • Given that developing countries face the harshest climate impacts despite minimal responsibility for global emissions, what moral or practical obligations do developed nations have to support them—and how should that support be structured? • Considering the film's depiction of environmental catastrophe, what political lessons can be drawn about global governance, climate justice, and the balance between national interest and collective survival?" • How does "The Day After Tomorrow" explore moral choices in times of crisis (e.g., who to save, how to allocate resources, or when to act)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch: The Day After Tomorrow (2004) • Read: "The Diary of an Interesting Year", Helen Simpson • Extra: "Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years From Now" (Matthew Olzmann) • Extra: "Advice to a Prophet" (Richard Wilbur) • Extra: "Time capsule found on the dead planet" (Margaret Atwood)
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11/13(Thu) Climate, Finance, Politics Workshop

11/14(Fri) **Project/Paper 2 Due by 11:59pm**

11/18(Tue)	<p>Fanaticism (Student Led Week: Navin, Andrea, Florence)</p> <p>Reading questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what ways does Immortal Joe's influence on the War Boys exemplify fanaticism? • How does constructing a collective identity for the War Boys that suppresses their individuality reinforce his power? • What role does cult-like thinking and removal of individuality play in political fanaticism? • How can we make sense of political fanaticism today compared to the roots of fanaticism tracing back to the French Wars of Religion? • If possible at all, how do we prevent/create conditions unfavorable for political fanaticism? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch: Mad Max: Fury Road (2015) • Read: Fanaticism may be rising alarmingly fast. But it's a very old problem (Washington Post, see canvas files) • Read: The Changing Face of Fanaticism • Read: Psychology of Fanaticism
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11/20(Thu)	Fananticism Workshop or Work on Own Projects	
11/25(Tue)	Fall Break No Class	
11/27(Thu)	Fall Break No Class	
12/2(Tue)	Presentations Day 1	Presentations
12/4(Thu)	Presentations Day 2	Presentations
12/9(Tue)	Presentations Day 3	(Maybe Zoom Class or No Class)
12/12(Fri)	Project/Paper 3 Due by 11:59 pm	

Extra Inspiration

Over the years I have assigned (or wanted to assign) these works. I can't bear to delete them from the syllabus entirely even if there is no room in the flow of weeks this year. So, I leave them here as extra inspiration for folks thinking about their projects. Please also see [past syllabi for this class](#).

Fiction	Paired Non-Fiction
Bruce Sterling (2011). <i>Distraction</i> . Spectra	J.J Rousseau (1985). <i>The Government of Poland</i> . Hackett Pub Co Inc (see online Chapters 2,3,4,13)
B. Sterling (1996). <i>Holy Fire</i> . Bantam Books	Maybe Bentham or Jamais Cascio and David Brin (2007). "Politics: Participatory Panopticon". Whitepaper
Cory Doctorow (2017). <i>Walkaway: A Novel</i> . Tor Books (No need to read the Epilogue)	See: <ul style="list-style-type: none">the review of the book in The Economics of Cory Doctorow's WalkawayExtra: Read the discussion of <i>Walkaway</i> on Crooked Timber (the discussion of Walkaway on Crooked Timber).Extra: More of the <i>Crooked Timber</i> posts here and here (Doctorow's own essay).
Joanna Russ (2018). <i>The female man</i> . Open Road Media (first published in 1975)	Kim Stanley Robinson (n.d.). "Joanna Russ, <i>The Female Man</i> ". Unpublished manuscript
Iain M. Banks (2008). <i>The Player of Games</i> . Orbit. isbn: 0316005401[first part]	" A Few Notes on the Culture " (Iain Banks). Watch the ILD documentary " The Mystery of Capital among the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon " [about 20 mins] and a brief film about Hernando de Soto . [about 7 mins]
N. Stephenson (2000). <i>The Diamond Age</i> . Bantam Books	V. Hearne and D. McCaig (2007). <i>Adam's task: Calling animals by name</i> . Skyhorse Pub Co Inc ["How to Say Fetch!"] (On education, authority, the disciplinary society)
Neill Blomkamp (2013). <i>Elysium</i> [Motion picture]. Columbia TriStar Pictures	Edward Halter's analysis, http://www.artforum.com/slant/id=44552
R.A. Heinlein (1997). <i>The moon is a harsh mistress</i> . Orb Books	Something on libertarianism
Becky Chambers (2022). <i>A Prayer for the Crown-Shy: A Monk and Robot Book</i> . Vol. 2. Tordotcom (esp Chap 1 and 2)	Maybe Federica Carugati and Margaret Levi (2021). <i>A moral political economy: Present, past, and future</i> . Cambridge University Press
C. Stross (2006). <i>Accelerando</i> . Orbit	Computational communism, post-humanity, singularity
C. Stross (2007). <i>Halting state</i> . Ace Books	Internet of things
Malka Older (2018a). <i>Infomocracy</i> . Tordotcom; Malka Older (2018b). <i>State Tectonics</i> . Vol. 3. Tordotcom;Malka Older (2017). <i>Null States: Book Two of the Centenal Cycle</i> . Vol. 2. Tordotcom	Something on voting systems and sizes of polities.
A. Niccol (1997). <i>Gattaca</i> [Motion picture]. Columbia TriStar Pictures(movie)	Social stratification
Spike Jonze (2013). <i>Her</i> [Motion picture]. Annapurna Pictures (movie)	AI relations

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