

ARTSSCI 4ST3: Selected Topics in Inquiry, “Interfaces: our technology, ourselves” Winter 2021/ Tuesdays 2:30-4:20 and Fridays, 10:30-11:20/ Office hour Tuesdays 11:30-12:20 (individual Zoom meetings by email appointment).

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Several core ideas will frame materials concerning the interface between technology and the human as they emerge from more than a century of public discourse on science and also science fiction: our relationship with technology has always been characterized by an array of contradictory attitudes and practices (wishful thinking, creative imagination, fear and uncertainty, for example). Both scientific practice and science fiction, along with popular culture, address these in different ways, from many different angles. We'll be considering the ideology of the transhumanism movement as a frame we can return to at different stages in the term, since the movement is deeply rooted in very specific definitions of the human and the technological which provoke argument, and also because many aspects of the movement are rooted in science fiction.

Seminars

Classes will be on Zoom, as well as office hour after class and individual meetings you set up by email. Some asynchronous classes with activities may be scheduled in response to your demands or under conditions beyond our control in which the platform is temporarily unavailable or unworkable.

The seminar format may be unfamiliar: there are no lectures as such, but the class consists of student-driven discussion. I'll post a few framing comments and questions on Avenue the day before class or earlier to assist planning your own participation. Make sure you're familiar with the schedule, and always read ahead. You can't discuss the readings without having read them – classes are meant as discussion of, not introduction to, the texts.

In-class activities may also include written exercises, group work and communal annotation on NowComment, an annotating platform I've found useful for several years if discussions are not working due to lack of participation. You'd all have the same text and can inset marginal comments and questions which we'll all be able to read, as well as conduct short discussions.

We'll keep in mind the history of the exponentially-increasing presence of technology in human life from 1900 to the present, and where we find the hopes, fears and wishful thinking associated with technology that characterize both many of our important imaginaries and myths as well as beliefs, expressed in science and speculative fiction as well as other kinds of culture.

A primary emphasis will be on the process of research itself – how does one establish an area of interest, define and research it? Each student will be able to outline their own area and approach to our materials, as well as finding their own.

Assignments and evaluations

Annotated bibliography – January 26th

Our own research will begin with an exercise to help each of you choose an area of interest to get you started: I'll provide a bibliography of academic and popular culture sources, websites and science fiction from which you select six items (you can also find other sources not in that bibliography if you wish), describing each in terms of how it defines an area of research for you in a paragraph. We'll share these, so that we become familiar with everyone else's interests, and how different people are mapping out ways of examining them. (15%)

Short papers – Due February 9th and 26th

As we discuss individual questions in class (see schedule), fine distinctions and subtle arguments will emerge. Two short papers (1200-1500 words) will each focus deeply on a single idea you want to examine more deeply; these are likely to be related to a big picture you're working towards in your chosen research area. (20% each)

Seminar presentation – see schedule

In the last few weeks of term, each of you will be putting together a short audio file (or audio and video) presentation of 8-10 minutes, and will submit that and a handout to the class on Avenue to Learn (instructions, scheduling and helpful advice will be available in advance), so that we'll be able to give feedback and ask questions over several classes (depending on class size). These presentations will outline what you want to do in your final paper, and our feedback will be helpful in framing your ideas, clarifying them, and identifying possible ways of developing your ideas. (15%)

Your final paper – due last day of classes - will have had a strong foundation by the time you complete it; the course will help you create your own area of research and produce a finished work. We'll be focusing on research and writing, appropriate referencing and how to develop workable lines of inquiry, while improving writing in general. (30%)

Written assignments are due midnight at the end of the day specified; the penalty of 5% per day begins to be applied at the end of a grace period of 24 hours after the deadline.

Course Objectives

- Class discussion will be determined by your interests, *and each of you will submit an audiofile presentation in the last three weeks of class.* By that time, you'll have opened up some specific interests in the material with regard to the issues and topics in the course description, so that you'll have a good range of possibilities to discuss what engages you. These will be submitted as audio/ audiovisual files we'll discuss in class and produce feedback for presenters to help integrate and expand materials into the final research paper.
- We'll work with all due care concerning accommodations, and disability as a way of reframing our materials.
- By the end of the course you'll have done a lot of writing and talking about what is largely left unspoken and unnoticed concerning the ways in which technology mediates human-machine relationships in our otherwise familiar culture. You'll be able to plan and deliver a conference paper, give comments as a member of a discussion panel, and speak knowledgeably on a topic you've chosen and researched. If you want to apply to do graduate work, you may be able to use this material to build or model your research proposal.

REQUIRED COURSE MATERIALS

Articles from *The Guardian*, *Scientific American Mind* and other links – an extensive bibliography will be supplied.

Transhumanist base texts

<https://whatistranshumanism.org>

<https://humanityplus.org/philosophy/transhumanist-declaration/>

Fiction

Peter Watts, “A Niche” and “Home,” from *Ten Monkeys, Ten Minutes* (2000) - courseware

Bruce Sterling, *Swarm* (1982) – courseware

David Brin, “Piecework” (1990) – courseware

Cory Doctorow, “Unauthorized Bread” (2019) – first story in *Radicalized*

Naomi Kritzer, “Cat Pictures Please” http://clarkesworldmagazine.com/kritzer_01_15/

Sunspring, a short SF film written by an AI (‘Benjamin’) supplied with a base of SF film scripts, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LY7x2lhqjmc>

Zone Out, (or “The Brain that Wouldn’t De”) a short science film written by ‘Benjamin’ supplied with the *Sunspring* actors and earlier SF films, 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUgUeFu2Dcw>

SUGGESTED: I suggest watching *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) and reading Donna Haraway’s *Manifesto for Cyborgs* [supplied on Avenue] for background but also as possible materials for your own research, if you’re interested in 20th technological history. Other great sources are Mamoru Oshii’s films *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and *Innocence* (2004), not to be confused with the television series or the more recent film.

SENATE-APPROVED ADVISORY STATEMENTS

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behaviour in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity. **It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty.**

Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behaviour can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: “Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty”), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the [Academic Integrity Policy](https://secretariat.mcmaster.ca/university-policies-procedures-guidelines/), located at <https://secretariat.mcmaster.ca/university-policies-procedures-guidelines/>.

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

- plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one’s own or for which other credit has been obtained.
- improper collaboration in group work.
- copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

AUTHENTICITY / PLAGIARISM DETECTION

Some courses may use a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal authenticity and ownership of student submitted work. For courses using such software, students will be expected to submit their work electronically either directly to Turnitin.com or via an online learning platform (e.g. A2L, etc.) using plagiarism detection (a service supported by Turnitin.com) so it can be checked for academic dishonesty.

Students who do not wish their work to be submitted through the plagiarism detection software must inform the Instructor before the assignment is due. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to the plagiarism detection software. **All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld** (e.g., online search, other software, etc.). For more details about McMaster’s use of Turnitin.com please go to www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity.

COURSES WITH AN ONLINE ELEMENT

Some courses may use online elements (e.g. e-mail, Avenue to Learn (A2L), LearnLink, web pages, capa, Moodle, ThinkingCap, etc.). Students should be aware that, when they access the

electronic components of a course using these elements, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster e-mail accounts, and program affiliation may become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in a course that uses online elements will be deemed consent to this disclosure. If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.

ONLINE PROCTORING

Some courses may use online proctoring software for tests and exams. This software may require students to turn on their video camera, present identification, monitor and record their computer activities, and/or lock/restrict their browser or other applications/software during tests or exams. This software may be required to be installed before the test/exam begins.

CONDUCT EXPECTATIONS

As a McMaster student, you have the right to experience, and the responsibility to demonstrate, respectful and dignified interactions within all of our living, learning and working communities. These expectations are described in the [Code of Student Rights & Responsibilities](#) (the “Code”). All students share the responsibility of maintaining a positive environment for the academic and personal growth of all McMaster community members, **whether in person or online**.

It is essential that students be mindful of their interactions online, as the Code remains in effect in virtual learning environments. The Code applies to any interactions that adversely affect, disrupt, or interfere with reasonable participation in University activities. Student disruptions or behaviours that interfere with university functions on online platforms (e.g. use of Avenue 2 Learn, WebEx or Zoom for delivery), will be taken very seriously and will be investigated. Outcomes may include restriction or removal of the involved students’ access to these platforms.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities who require academic accommodation must contact [Student Accessibility Services](#) (SAS) at 905-525-9140 ext. 28652 or sas@mcmaster.ca to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. For further information, consult McMaster University’s [Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities](#) policy.

REQUESTS FOR RELIEF FOR MISSED ACADEMIC TERM WORK

McMaster Student Absence Form (MSAF): In the event of an absence for medical or other reasons, students should review and follow the Academic Regulation in the Undergraduate Calendar “Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work”.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION FOR RELIGIOUS, INDIGENOUS OR SPIRITUAL OBSERVANCES (RISO)

Students requiring academic accommodation based on religious, indigenous or spiritual observances should follow the procedures set out in the [RISO](#) policy. Students should submit their request to their Faculty Office **normally within 10 working days** of the beginning of term in which they anticipate a need for accommodation or to the Registrar’s Office prior to their examinations. Students should also contact their instructors as soon as possible to make alternative arrangements for classes, assignments, and tests.

COPYRIGHT AND RECORDING

Students are advised that lectures, demonstrations, performances, and any other course

material provided by an instructor include copyright protected works. The Copyright Act and copyright law protect every original literary, dramatic, musical and artistic work, **including lectures** by University instructors.

The recording of lectures, tutorials, or other methods of instruction may occur during a course. Recording may be done by either the instructor for the purpose of authorized distribution, or by a student for the purpose of personal study. Students should be aware that their voice and/or image may be recorded by others during the class. Please speak with the instructor if this is a concern for you.

EXTREME CIRCUMSTANCES

The University reserves the right to change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances (e.g., severe weather, labour disruptions, etc.). Changes will be communicated through regular McMaster communication channels, such as McMaster Daily News, A2L and/or McMaster email.

NOTES FOR ALL ARTS & SCIENCE COURSES

1. Some of the statements above refer to a “Faculty Office”; please note that the Arts & Science Program Office serves in this capacity.
2. It is the responsibility of students to check their McMaster email regularly. Announcements will be made in class, via A2L, and/or via the course email distribution list <d-as4ST3@mcmaster.ca>.

Since September 1982, the grading scale has been as seen below:

Grade	Equivalent Grade Point	Equivalent Percentages
A+	12	90-100
A	11	85-89
A-	10	80-84
B+	9	77-79
B	8	73-76
B-	7	70-72
C+	6	67-69
C	5	63-66
C-	4	60-62
D+	3	57-59
D	2	53-56
D-	1	50-52
F	0	0-49 -- Failure

SCHEDULE

January 12/ Introduction to the course: assignments and evaluation, materials, expectations. How to go about determining an area of interest, developing ideas, research and building a project. How do the assignments lead into the final paper?

15/ Disciplines and interdisciplinarity; critical thinking across disciplines. The annotated bibliography as a methodology for beginning your work. The role of science fiction in interrogating the course topic.

Make sure you've looked over the bibliography before this class: the areas I've delineated might well be reorganized according to your own interests. What other headings might you like to see here? Note the additional bibliography on ecology posted.

19/ Transhumanist base texts: bring questions for discussion, search for inconsistencies, good arguments or bad ones – or simply inadequate arguments. On what kinds of ground do these arguments rest? Are there hidden assumptions, and, if so, can you describe them?

22/ What are the problematics of merging with technology?

26/ Bruce Sterling's *Swarm* and transhumanist base texts: what are the liabilities of human intelligence? **Annotated Bibliography due.**

29/ Terminology, argument and research: clarity, finding solid ground, the pitfalls of mass-culture, moral panic and outrage.

February 2/ An overview of some points of interest in in human/ technological interface from the 18thc to now. The imaginary of human transformation picks up speed and gathers momentum. Film footage from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). Your questions about the history of technology as human transformation, imagined and actual.

5/ Technology and work. "Piecework," by David Brin (1990).

9/ Technology and environmental shaping: your discussion points on the current human-technological interface. We'll begin with some points made in "Piecework" and develop them along the lines you bring. **Short paper 1 due.**

12/ What kinds of knowledge would working in this area (science and ecology) more deeply require? What kinds of areas might there be useful resources for this course in that area? (Additional bibliography supplied.)

READING WEEK

23/ The optimism of transhumanism versus living, working and hacking into an unbalanced world: *Radicalized*, by Cory Doctorow (2019). We'll be focusing on the story, "Unauthorized Bread".

26/ Myths and misconceptions of the information age: I'll present a brief history of the human brain from early computing to the present, with a focus on how it's changed. I'll run this class as though it were a conference paper, and you can ask the questions. It will serve as a model for your own presentations, so questions about those will also be answered. **Short paper 2 due.**

March 2/ Technology as helping humans alter their environment versus forcible adaptation in a utilitarian approach to trauma and its aftereffects: "A Niche" and "Home", by Peter Watts (2000).

5/ We'll view the short films written by the AI, *Sunspring* and *Zone Out*, in class, with a view to pooling observations and initial impressions. I'll post a new short bibliography on both science and science fiction on the subject of AI for next class. Choose your own readings for discussion: everybody bring a few points from an article or primary text.

9/ Artificial intelligence: how we see it, how it sees us. We can treat this class as a practice run at a presentation, discussing styles of delivery, handouts and time limits, etc.

12/ Algorithms, chatbots and the myth of sentience: "Cat Pictures Please". How is sentience defined? Is it a useful definition?

16/ Progress report on research. How do the papers lead to a presentation? What place does a research presentation have in a final project?

19/ First set of seminar presentations and class discussion (3).

23/ Second set of seminar presentations/ discussion (6).

26/ Third set of seminar presentations/ discussion (3).

30/ Fourth set of seminar presentations/ discussion (6)

April 6/ Final set of seminar presentations/ discussion and emergency changes.

9/ Research issues arising: focus, choice of materials, organization, referencing, last minute reading, etc.

13/ Final papers: final issues workshop. Individual Zoom meeting schedule set up.

Final paper due.