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1. The Course

Description

Utopias and dystopias have become widespread in modern culture. This course discusses the origin and character of utopias and dystopias through an examination of their presentation in various works of literature and visual media.

Objectives and pedagogy

“It is not so very important for a person to learn facts. For that [a person] does not really need a college. The value of an education in a liberal arts college is not the learning of many facts but the training of the mind to think something that cannot be learned from textbooks.”

— Albert Einstein (1921), quoted in Philipp Frank, *Einstein: His Life and Times* (1947)

This is a liberal arts course. It is not intended to provide students with information or data and test their memories. A basis of contextualizing information will be established whenever necessary and assumed in our analyses and interpretations of the course materials. The primary pedagogical purpose of the course is to cultivate literacy in the traditional sense and, more ambitiously, to promote better insight, understanding, and moral judgment by encouraging students to reflect on intrinsically meaningful, challenging, or at least interesting books, articles, works of art, and products of the entertainment industry.

No one needs to take a university course to know that dystopias should be avoided and that utopian aspirations are a good thing. Then again, perhaps utopian aspirations might not be such a good thing. There certainly are a great many utopias on offer and people do have profound disagreements about them. A liberal arts course, at its best, is a forum in which such disagreements can be raised and clarified through discussion and reflection. In this course we’ll discuss the nature of utopias and dystopias with several authors and artists – for reading a text or appreciating an artwork is fundamentally a discussion with another person – and we’ll discuss things among ourselves as well, in as much as that’s possible in a classroom setting. I’d like our discussion to take place without a formal distinction between “lecture” and the “tutorial” sections of the class, but we’ll decide how best to use the class time during our first meeting.

To use a term favoured by administrators, the “content” of this course is discussion – informed and mindful discussion in the shared circumstance of a classroom. The content is also the engagement with the course texts and other materials; and the content might also be said to be the assignments. But the content of this course is most definitely *not* information or data that can be accessed, delivered, and reproduced in one way or another indifferently. If a course were

nothing but the delivery of known information, there'd be no reason for a university; it would be sufficient for each of us to scroll through web searches and watch videos on our own.

Course texts

When required, print copies of the readings are recommended. I understand that the university bookstore, a.k.a. "The Campus Store," might not be your preferred source for texts. There are many retail outlets from which to obtain them: use your favourite.

For practical purposes, however, a more important consideration is that all the course texts will be available online in one form or another. Many will be in the public domain. Others will be available on Kindle or similar platforms. Some texts will be available as e-books through the university library, for the time being still known as "The Library." Access the texts in the way that's most convenient for you. Just be sure that you're accessing the right edition. Acceptable editions for each text will be discussed in class, as necessary. To be sure that everyone has access, I'll be posting digital copies of the right editions of the texts on A2L. And so, it might just be possible to avoid having to purchase any of the course texts at all. I wouldn't recommend it, though.

There will also be a good deal of visual media used in the course, both required and optional. You'll be relieved to learn that it will *not* be necessary to purchase any DVDs for this course. All films will be available through the library, either as DVDs or through the library's own access to video streams. With one exception: toward the end of term, we'll be discussing this summer's Netflix movie, *Spiderhead*. It's only available through the streaming service; however, I'm told everyone already either has a subscription or knows a friend's password. We'll discuss the various ways to access visual media for the purposes of assignments in class.

2. The Schedule

1. Sept. 7 Introduction to the course
 "The Apocalypse of Peter" (2nd century AD); the New Jerusalem
2. Sept. 14 Tao Qian, "Peach Blossom Spring" (5th century CE)
 Lost Horizon (1937 movie, dir. Frank Capra)
3. Sept. 21 Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516), excerpts
4. Sept. 28 Shakespeare, *Tempest* (1611)
5. Oct. 5 Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900)
 The Wizard of Oz (1939 movie, dir. Victor Fleming)
6. Reading week – no class
7. Oct. 19 H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (1895)
 The Time Machine (1960 movie, dir. George Pal)

8. Oct. 26 E.M. Forster, “The Machine Stops” (1909)
Metropolis (1927 movie, dir. Fritz Lang)
Modern Times (1936 movie, dir. Charlie Chaplin)
9. Nov. 2 Lois Lowry, *The Giver* (1993)
10. Nov. 9 George Orwell, *1984* (1949)
11. Nov. 16 George Orwell, *1984* (1949)
12. Nov. 23 George Saunders, “Escape from Spiderhead” (2010)
Spiderhead (2022 movie, Netflix)
13. Nov. 30 George Saunders, “Jon” (2003), and “I Can Speak!TM” (1999)
14. Dec. 7 Concluding discussion

3. The Assignments

Tutorial participation	10%
Reading responses (2x15%)	30%
Essay	30%
Final take-home assignment	30%

Participation (10%)

This should be self-explanatory. Participation presumes attendance, for instance; and preparation; and, well, some sort of “participation.” We’ll discuss the specifics in class.

The response papers and the essay – general requirements

Use only the course materials for your assignments. In other words, do *not* consult any secondary sources, reference works, or the internet. I repeat: *do not use the internet*. Any evidence of internet use in your work will be penalized. As well, your written work must be proof-read the old-fashioned way for spelling and grammatical errors and clarity of style: relying on spelling and grammar functions of your software will not be enough.

The response papers (2 x 15 = 30%)

Students will write two short papers, each of which responds to an assigned text or show *and its discussion in class and tutorial*. Each of the response papers should be three typed pages (c. 900 words), standard essay format (double-spaced, normal margins, 12-point font). Students may write on any two texts or shows discussed in class before reading week.

A response paper should not be a simple summary. It should engage some interesting aspect of a text or show in a reflective way. Students are responsible for coming up with their own topics for papers – that’s part of the assignment.

As an alternative to writing two short papers, students may also write one longer response paper comparing two or more texts or shows, selected again from anything discussed before reading week. A comparative paper should be six typed pages (c. 1800 words), standard essay format (double-spaced, normal margins, 12-point font). All topics for comparative papers must receive prior approval from the TA.

Due dates: It’s generally best to get things done as soon as possible, especially assignments early in the term. The rule of thumb for response papers is to have them done one week after the final class on the text or show selected; and in the case of comparisons, one week after the final class on the later of the two titles selected.

The essay – topic, outline, final form (30%)

The essay will be a comparative discussion of some relevant aspect or theme in any *two* texts or movies discussed in class, with two conditions: (1) the student has *not* already discussed either of those titles in a response paper previously; and (2) at least one *major* text or movie is selected for the comparison. The essay will address the assigned texts or shows *and their discussion in class and tutorial*. Students are responsible for coming up with their own topics for the essay – again, that’s part of the assignment.

To ensure a good start on the assignment, each student will clear a one or two sentence summary of a proposed topic (mentioning the titles to be compared, of course) with the TA. As part of the process of working up the essay, a student has the *option* of submitting a brief outline specifying the ways in which a cleared topic will be addressed and arranging to discuss the outline with the TA. An outline should be one to two typed pages of prose; no point-form outlines, please. Neither the outline nor the meeting will be graded.

In summary, each student is required to select his or her own topic, to formulate an argument that engages some interesting aspect of two course titles in a reflective way, to demonstrate the argument with appropriate exegesis, and to present everything as elegantly as possible. The result of the process will be an essay that should be eight or nine typed pages (not counting title page and any apparatus; c, 2,400 -2,700 words), standard essay format (double-spacing, normal margins, 12-point font).

Due dates: Please submit your essay three weeks after the final lecture on the later of the two titles selected. The absolute deadline is first thing in the morning, November 28.

Final take-home assignment (30%)

There will not be a sit-down final exam in this course. There will, however, be a take-home assignment, to be completed at some convenient time after the end of classes. The format, content, procedures and timing of the test will be decided sometime before the final class, with

student suggestions welcome. Concerning timing: one option I'm considering seriously is using the last week of class (Dec 1 to 8) for the take-home; if that's convenient and agreeable to everyone, I would cancel the Dec 7 class, of course. Some things about the content of the test can be safely inferred now: it will certainly cover all the titles after reading week, but it won't be limited to them. And one aspect of the take-home is non-negotiable: students will be required to write answers in prose – in other words, there will be *no* multiple-choice questions on the test.

4. The Word

Spelling counts

Written work will be marked on grammar, clarity of expression, organization and presentation, as well as on the quality of its content and analysis. Students who wish to improve their writing skills might visit any of McMaster's various support services. There are no shortcuts, however. The best way to improve is to write a lot and, more importantly, to read a lot – "indiscriminately and all the time with [your] eyes hanging out" (Dylan Thomas).

Words and power

In everything they write, students should follow five fundamental rules recommended by George Orwell in "Politics and the English Language" (1946):

1. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
2. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
3. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
4. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
5. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

41 other rules for writing good stuff

1. Always check your spelling.
2. Proof-read to see if you any words out.
3. Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
4. Verb tense, today and always, was important.
5. Prepositions are terms one should not end sentences with.
6. Steer clear of incorrect forms of verbs that have snuck in the language.
7. The right way to use "is" is, is that it shouldn't be used this way.
8. Muster the courage to boldly refuse to incorrectly split an infinitive.
9. Don't use contractions in formal writing.
10. Use the apostrophe in it's proper place and omit it when its not needed.
11. Verb's and simple plural's don't require them.
12. Don't use no double negatives.
13. The adverb usually follows the verb.
14. Statements, like, aren't similes or guesses?
15. Write all adverbial forms correct.

16. Place pronouns as close as possible, especially in long sentences, as of ten words or more, to their antecedents.
17. Everyone should be careful to use a singular pronoun with singular nouns in their writing.
18. Avoid run-on sentences they are hard to read.
19. No sentence fragments.
20. And don't start a sentence with a conjunction.
21. If you write well and I write well, how is it that you and me don't? If this is a lesson to you, and to me as well, then why isn't it a lesson to you and I?
22. Don't overuse exclamation marks!!!
23. "It is best not to use too many 'quotation 'marks,'" he said.
24. Avoid commas, that are not necessary, and un-necessary hyphens, too.
25. Use the semicolon properly, always use it where it is appropriate; and never where it isn't.
26. Writing carefully, dangling participles must be avoided.
27. Don't string too many prepositional phrases together unless you are one of those walking through the valley of the shadow of death.
28. If you reread your work, you will find on rereading that a great deal of repetition and redundancy can be avoided by rereading and editing.
29. Never, ever use repetitive redundancies.
30. A writer must not shift your point of view in mid-sentence.
31. It's really unfair, but things such as human beings, which are animate, get to begin their subordinate clauses differently than other things such as rocks, who are not.
32. Eschew dialect, irregardless.
33. Also, avoid awkward and affected alliteration.
34. Of course, it is incumbent upon everyone to avoid archaisms.
35. Always pick on the correct idiom.
36. Take the bull by the hand and say no to mixed metaphors.
37. Avoid trendy elocutions that sound flaky.
38. From the dawn of time, we have been commanded not to utter sweeping generalizations.
39. Resist hyperbole, even if you have to remind yourself a thousand times.
40. Last but not least, avoid clichés like the plague.
41. First, lists are not arguments; and thirdly, they are often numbered inconsistently.
42. Great green dragons might exist, but green great dragons certainly don't because the mysterious rule about adjectival order in English is opinion-size-age-shape-colour-origin-material-purpose before the noun. If you don't believe me, check out my lovely little old rectangular green French silver whittling knife.

5. The Law

Assignment policies

Assignments will be submitted either on A2L or as email attachments; announcements about the most appropriate means will be made in class and posted on A2L. Assignments will be graded using McMaster's scale: <https://registrar.mcmaster.ca/exams-grades/grades/#tab-3>

Departmental policy

Staff in the office of the Department of Religious Studies will not receive papers and other assignments. Students must submit their assignments directly to their TA or the professor.

University policies

1. Academic integrity statement

You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behavior in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity. 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 behavior 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.

It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, located at www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity. The following are only three forms of academic dishonesty: (1) plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one’s own or for which credit has been obtained; (2) improper collaboration in group work; (3) copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

2. Authenticity / plagiarism detection

Some courses might 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., on-line search, other software). For more details about McMaster’s use of Turnitin.com please go to:

www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity.

3. Courses with an on-line element

Some courses might use on-line 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 might 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 on-line 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.

4. Online proctoring

Some courses might 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.

5. 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., the 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.

6. 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.

7. Requests for relief for missed academic term work

The 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.”

8. 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.

9. 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 either by 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.

10. 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.

And a final course policy

If you've gone through the entire syllabus carefully, you might not be best pleased to read that this syllabus is subject to change at any time, with due notice given to in-course students. All changes will be announced and discussed in class and posted on A2L.