

HISTORY OF THE FUTURE

Course Info:

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 CNH/610
 Office hrs: Thur. 12.00-13.30
 by appointment

Grade Breakdown:

Participation:	10%
Twitter:	10%
Collaborative:	20%
Paleo-Future:	10%
Futurist Slidecast:	20%
Future Zine:	30%

Course Tools:

- Thomas More, *Utopia*
- Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*
- Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*
- Don DeLillo, *Zero K*
- Students are also expected to have access to OCR software. I recommend subscribing to Acrobat Pro for the duration of the semester
- Students should sign up for their own Google account



Course Description

In *The Mysterious Island* (1874), Jules Verne imagined filtering hydrogen from water to create power. He called water “the coal of the future.” More than a hundred years later, hydrogen fuel cells raised hopes that they would revolutionize the energy industry...

This course will examine how past societies imagined the future. Our focus will be the history of the relationship between technology, imagination, and the future—and how those intersected to create utopian visions. It will investigate how technology has historically shaped social ideas about the future and how those social ideas about the future influenced subsequent technologies. I submit that technological systems are at the root of this interface. We begin our investigation with a crash course on systems, before applying that lens to histories of environmental prediction, planning, and resilience.





A Note on Historical Engagement

My research and the topics and questions that interest me typically stress making history relevant in twenty-first century political and cultural discourse. That is to say, I engage in a kind of contemporary history in which I try to bring valuable historical context to current debate. Here's the rub: while many of the themes that drive my research are grounded in presentist issues, I am—first and foremost—an historian. In this class, so are you. Your reflections on course readings, your research inquiries, and your papers should reflect good historical analysis and you should not be tempted to drift into philosophical or political assertions of what “ought” to be. Historians look backward on what “was” as a means of contributing to a larger discussion about the human condition, not as a means of forecasting an ideal future. In spite of the numerous siren calls that present themselves over the course of this semester, it is imperative that you cling to history as a discipline, methodology, and mode of inquiry.

Course Objectives

Studying the history of the future permits a series of learning outcomes.

- **Introduction to technological systems and a novel perspective on modern history** First and foremost, students will acquire an appreciation for the history of technology as well as a new prism for exploring historical inquiry
- **Close reading & historical analysis** Engaging with different works, students will cultivate close reading and annotation skills to enhance their understanding and research potential
- **Development of writing & communication skills** Students will continue to work on writing and communication clarity through a variety of different media
- **Rudimentary digital research skills** Students will receive in-class training in basic data visualization techniques to enhance their traditional research
- **Emphasis on the value of collaborative work** Shared efforts produce superior results. The culminating project for this course will task students to work in teams.



Class Participation

Rather than structuring the course around lectures, an emphasis will be put on developing in-class research skills and techniques in order to facilitate student inquiry (there will also be some lecturing—though I promise to keep it limited and upbeat). This means that attendance is more or less mandatory.

Participation is just that. While there will be opportunities to engage in classroom and small group discussion, participation also implies the deliberate investment in active learning. Class activities require student buy-in in order to realize success and self-discovery. This component of the overall grade evaluates student attendance and assumes that students will come to class prepared to discuss the assigned readings.

Participation also insists that we will all respect each other, even when we disagree. (I will not tolerate aggressive contributions that discourage others from participating; such behaviour will be reflected in a low grade). In addition, participation assumes that we will bring our knowledge, ideas, and commitment to class, including ideas from lectures and the readings. Think about counter-arguments and questions to ask.

Participation does not mean perpetual contributions. It also involves listening. And it demands active attention in the class and to its discussion. When giving a participation grade, I consider the relevance of students' remarks to the readings, critical skills, depth of analysis, understanding of material, amount of participation, and clarity of thought and expression. Often, the best participation grades are awarded to students who ask questions that take us beyond the immediate scope of the readings and/or connect their thoughts to other topics previously raised. I do not mark simply on quantity. Nor do I expect students to agree with me. I do expect that we will engage in thoughtful, sometimes robust, debate and discussion. These are the criteria for marking class participation. Finding it difficult to speak in class is not an acceptable excuse for lack of participation; students are encouraged to integrate themselves into the culture of the class and find ways to contribute in smaller group settings.

Statement of Academic Integrity and Dishonesty:

McMaster University and the Department of History states unequivocally that it demands scholarly integrity from all its members. Academic dishonesty, in whatever form, is ultimately destructive of the values of higher learning; furthermore, it is unfair and discouraging to those students who pursue their studies honestly.

Academic dishonesty consists of misrepresenting by deception or by other fraudulent means and 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 kinds of academic dishonesty please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, specifically Appendix 3, located at: <http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity/>

The following illustrate only three of the various forms of academic dishonesty:

1. Plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained.
2. Improper collaboration in group work.
3. Copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

Plagiarism and any other form of academic dishonesty will not be accepted in this course. If you are at all unsure what constitutes plagiarism, please consult with your tutorial instructor.



"Tomorrow, perhaps, the future"

Twitter Assignment

Starting on 15 January, students will contribute three tweets a week, relating to themes in HIST 3UA3, using the hashtag #3UA3. Tweets can link to relevant extra-curricular course topics or can simply be musings on readings or class discussion. This portion of the grade works on a pass/fail system on a weekly basis; if students post three substantive tweets, they will receive full marks for that week—less and they will receive zero. Students are encouraged to reply to each other to foster conversation. Missed weeks cannot be made up later. For all intents and purposes, the “week” will run from Monday morning to Sunday evening. Tweets that do not include #3UA3 will not receive credit.

Paleo-Future Visual Assignment

The visual assignment is due on Avenue to Learn by noon on Wednesday, 31 January. Students are charged with identifying a single piece of material or visual culture that predates the 1980s and imagines a relatively distant future. Your focus can be an advertisement, a piece of art, or some other expression of imagining the future. Your essay (not more than 1000 words) should reflect on the context in which it was created and indicate the manner in which it connects to course themes. The emphasis should be on the time in which the image was produced, not an evaluation of its accuracy in hindsight. Be sure to include the image of your focus to accompany your reflection. Effective situation of your chosen item in its proper historical context will likely require additional research (preferably in scholarly sources). I would prefer that students steer clear of textual or video topics.

Futurist Slidecast

Students will identify a futurist of their own choosing for an independent research project. Subjects and the main bulk of their work should predate the 1980s. The medium is a slidecast (slides + audio) in pecha kucha format: 20 images @ 20 seconds each for a total of 6:40. Students are strongly encouraged to clear research plans with me in advance. Slidecasts should be posted on YouTube (make sure that privacy settings make it possible for me to access your presentation) and the link submitted to Avenue to Learn by noon on Wednesday, 21 March. Students should also submit a transcript of their presentation, complete with full citations. Students will be evaluated on style (adhering to the strict format), research, content, and efficiency. 10% of



the slidecast's evaluation will be assigned to the transcript. Note that the assignment will not be considered complete until both slidecast url and transcript have been submitted.

In-Class Collaborative Exercises

Over the course of the semester, students will engage in five in-class collaborative exercises that relate closely to course readings. Students are expected to have completed the designated readings in advance. Some of the in-class projects will also require some advance preparation. Assignments will be submitted at the end of the class session for evaluation.

Future Zine

The major project for HIST 3UA3 consists of groups of students developing a collaborative zine on the history (and future) of a particularly technological system. Students should work independently and together on this assignment throughout the semester. A number of class sessions will be set aside for discussion and planning. The zine is due in the appropriate Avenue DropBox by noon on Friday 13 April. The majority of this grade will be apportioned independently, based on students' contributions to the project. A smaller part of the grade will be assessed for the zine's overall structure, content, aesthetics, etc.

Course Evaluation

I intend to make every effort to ensure that student work is graded in a fair and timely manner, and that students receive the kind of feedback on their work that justifies the grade assigned and helps them to understand how to improve for the next assignment. Every now and then, something slips through the cracks. No appeals will be accepted within 24 hours of the assignment being returned. In an e-mail to me, students should reflect on the comments and feedback they received on the assignment, indicating that they understand the TA's evaluation, before suggesting why they disagree with the grade they received.

The end of the semester is not the right time to seek help with your coursework or to appeal grades submitted earlier in the semester. If you are struggling with the course, make a point of meeting with me during office hours for assistance. Do this early in the semester and frequently. HIST 3UA3 also works on a firm policy that no bonus work for credit will be offered. Students should endeavour to do the best work they can from the beginning of the semester.

Modifications to Course Outline

The instructor and university reserve the right to modify elements of the course during term. The university may change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances. If either type of modification becomes necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. It is the responsibility of the student to check their McMaster e-mail and course websites weekly during the term and to note any changes.

Late Assignment Policy

Deadlines are firm. Because computers and printers and bandwidth connections invariably tend to crash at exactly the point when assignments are due, students are strongly encouraged to avoid waiting until the last minute. Technology glitches do not constitute a satisfactory excuse for late submission, especially in a course that trains its lens on the future. Plan ahead. Since the syllabus and course schedule are available to students in advance, I recommend that you begin readings early in order to avoid any untimely illnesses or other misadventures. A 10% per day penalty (to a maximum of 20%) will be levied against late assignments. Late assignments will only be accepted within two weeks of the stated deadline. Late assignments will be graded without comment.

E-mail Communication

It is the policy of the Faculty of Humanities that all e-mail communication between students and instructors (including TAs), and from students to staff, must originate from their official McMaster University e-mail accounts. This policy protects the confidentiality and sensitivity of information and confirms the identities of both the student and instructor. History Department instructors will delete messages that do not originate from McMaster e-mail accounts.

Please do not contact me using the Avenue Mail. I will occasionally send a message to the entire class through that medium, but I do not check my Avenue mail frequently. Instead, send me an e-mail to my regular McMaster address (egan@mcmaster.ca) from yours.

Note, too, that I mean to keep fairly strict e-mail hours. Do not expect a reply to your e-mail between 20.00 and 9.00. And do not expect to receive an e-mail reply on weekends. Which is to say: if you have a pressing question or concern, do not leave it until 21.00 on Friday evening to send me a message. I endeavour to reply to e-mails promptly—especially those that are time sensitive—but I apologize in advance if it takes more than a couple of days to reply.



COURSE SCHEDULE**Thursday, 4 January**

Introduction & Welcome to HIST 3UA3

Monday, 8 January

Where is My Rocket Pack & Other Promises from the Future

Video

1. History & the Future
2. Time Travel

Thursday, 11 January

The Shock of the Old & the Uses of Technology

Monday, 15 January

Technological Systems

Notes

Zine topics assigned in class

Twitter Assignment begins today

Thursday, 18 January

In-Class Collaborative Exercise I

Notes

Soft deadline for completing More's Utopia

Monday, 22 January

Zine Workshop I: Contours of the System

Video

3. Thematic Narratives
4. Chronological Narratives
5. Paleo-Futures

Thursday, 25 January

In-Class Collaborative Exercise II

Notes

Hard deadline for completing More's Utopia

Monday, 29 January

Zine Workshop II: Delegating Historical Assignments

Notes

Paleo-Future Assignment submitted to Avenue DropBox by noon on Wednesday, 31 January

Thursday, 1 February

Visualizing Utopia

Monday, 5 February

On Progress & Future Vocabularies

Video

6. The Day John Henry Died

Thursday, 8 February

Zine Workshop III: Bibliographies, Visuals, & Layouts

Monday, 12 February

Augmenting our Monsters & Augmented Reality

Video

7. Eugenics

Notes

Soft deadline for completing Shelley's Frankenstein

Thursday, 15 February

In-Class Collaborative Exercise III

Notes

Hard deadline for completing Shelley's Frankenstein

Monday, 19 February & Thursday, 22 February

Midterm Recess

Notes

No Twitter Assignment this week

Monday, 26 February

On Dystopias

Video

8. Nostalgia for the Future

9. Futurists

Thursday, 1 March

Parsing the Narrative

Monday, 5 March

Zine Workshop IV: Research & Writing Updates

Video

10. Science Fiction

11. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*

Thursday, 8 March

In-Class Collaborative Exercise IV

Notes

Hard deadline for completing Zamyatin's We

Monday, 12 March

Zine Workshop V: Peer Review & Editing

Video

12. The Essence of the Whole

Thursday, 15 March

No Class: Work on Slidecast

Monday, 19 March

Catastrophic History

Video

13. Gender & Technology

Notes

Futurist Slidecast submitted to Avenue DropBox by noon on Wednesday, 21 March

Thursday, 22 March

History, Future, Gender

Monday, 26 March

Life, Death, Future

Notes

Soft deadline for completing DeLillo's Zero K

Thursday, 29 March

In-Class Collaborative Exercise V

Notes

Hard deadline for completing DeLillo's Zero K

Last week of Twitter Assignment

Monday, 2 April

Faith in the Future & Why Are We So Scared?

Thursday, 5 April

Zine Timeline Presentations

Monday, 9 April

Zine Timeline Presentations

Notes

Future Zine submitted to Avenue DropBox by noon on Friday, 13 April