Mechanization and the Quality of Human Experience since the Industrial Revolution

Room:
Time:

Instructors: Peter John
Office: PCH Rm. 250
email: pjohn@ucsd.edu
Office hrs: tba
TA(s): (name(s), office, contact, office hours tba)

Texts: Course Reader
   * Frankenstein* (Shelley)
   * Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury)
   * Days of War, Nights of Love* (Crimethinc)
   (Recommended: D. Quinn, *Ishmael*)

This course asks you to reconsider our familiar equation of mechanization and progress. We will begin by considering the quality of human life before and after the Industrial Revolution. We will then explore the hypothesis that, as a result of our increasingly mechanized cultures, we have subjected ourselves to an “autonomous technology” (L. Winner) and with it, to a mechanical “measure” of the nature and quality of human existence (Adas). Finally, you will be asked to design a project in concert with your fellow students to explore the relation of machines and the quality of human experience. Throughout the course we will be using science fiction films, short stories, and novels, to probe our subject.

**PART I: Are we making progress?**

Week I: Ambiguities of Progress

A: Ambivalence about machines

1. Science Fiction as indicator of a cultural problem: mechanization and the quality of human experience (Ex: THX 1138; The Island)
2. From Prometheus to Frankenstein: antecedents to our modern concern about invention, control and the quality of life
3. Overview of course trajectory:
   - Part I: Are we making progress? Pre-Industrial Revolution, Industrial Revolution, Utopias, Luddites, *fin-de-siecle* period inventions, Futurism, Modernization, Modernity, Modernism
   - Part II: Humans as “Other”? Total War, Metropolis and the mechanization of everyday life, Dystopias, Criticism of and Counter-cultural responses to the Machine.
   - Part III: Project (Mechanization and the quality of human experience)
4. Student Project.

B: “Machine in the Garden”

1. The World Before (Ex: *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*)
2: Industrial Revolutions, for better or worse

Read: R.U. Sirius; Sadler Report and other documents of the Industrial Revolution; E.P. Thompson

Begin *Frankenstein*

**II: Utopias and Realities**

A. Designs on the Common Man

1. Pandemonium (Coleridge, Wordsworth)
2. 19th century Utopias and Prophecies (Fourier, Saint-Simon, Marx, Shakers)
3. Delacroix vs. de Musset
4. Arts and Crafts

B. “Brother, Can you spare a dime?”
   1. Frankenstein’s monster as allegory
   2. Luddites, Saboteurs, Zapatistas
   3. Germinal; Matewan; Norma Rae
   4. “Far From the Madding Crowd”: Visionaries (Rimbaud) and “Decadence” (Wilde, “Picture of Dorian Grey”; Huysman)

Read: 19th century selections from *Utopia Reader*; O. Wilde;

Finish *Frankenstein*

**III: The Speed of Things**

A: Technoeuphoria

1: Crystal Palace:
2. Mechanical Arts, ca 1900 (Train, Bicycle, Automobile, Airplane)
3. “Technological Sublime”
4. Art Nouveau
5. Vertov
6. Futurists

B: “Machines as the Measure of Man”

1: Ergonomics
2. Frenetic Pace of Everyday Life (“John Henry”)
3. Titanic as Metaphor (Kern)
4. “Fare the Well, Titanic” (Leadbelly)
5. Dread Nought

Read: Kern, Nye, Taylor, Adas; folk songs and poems.

Begin *Fahrenheit 451*

**PART II: Human as “Other”**

Week IV: “Machines for living”

A. “Total War” and the subjugation of the human
1. “Storm of Steel” (Junger’s experience as metaphor)
2. The Great War (Jay Winter)
3. Total War as status quo

B: Metropolis
1. Metropolis (Lang)
2. Bauhaus and Art Deco
3. Lilith (Kiefer)
4. Maquilopolis

Read: Simmel, Mumford, Roszak
Finish Fahrenheit 451

Form Groups and begin dialogue for Project: Mechanization and the Quality of Human Experience
(Presentation of documentation of completed project due 9th week)

Week V: Mountains of Truth, Wings of Desire: Sub and Counter-cultural responses to Modernization and Mechanization

A. Bohemia

1. Bohemians, Beats, Hippies, Punks
   2. Basquiat and other New York Stories
   3. Pop-culture as sublimation
   4. “Century of the Self”

B. Triumph of the Will

1. Images of Romantic Transcendence (National Gallery exhibit)
2. Ascona
3. Rites of Spring
4. Triumph of the Will; Olympia (Reifensthal, Art and Politics)

Read: Begin Days of War, Nights of Love

Week VI: “Machine Stops”

A. Dystopia, real and imagined
   1. We, Brave New World, 1984, Vendetta
   2. Fahrenheit 451
B. Fight Clubs: “Partial solutions to frequently encountered problems”
   1. “Air-Conditioned Nightmare”
   2. Unabomber Manifesto
      3. Terrorism as art (Lentricchia and MacAuliffe)

Read: Forster, Bradbury, Huxley, Zamiatin;
      Complete DoWNoL

Part III: A Feast of Friends

Week VII: Dining with Robots

A. Mechanization and the Quality of Human Experience
   1. Silent Running: two views on the artificial
   2. Dining With Robots (Ullman)
   3. Soylent Green

B. Uncanny Valley
   2. RUR, Bladerunner, IRobot

Read: Ullmann

Week VIII: Omnivore’s Dilemma

A. Quantity and Quality
   1. Babette’s Feast
   2. “Omnivore’s Dilemma” (Pollan); “Botany of Desire”

B. 1. Retail Therapy
   2. Etiquette in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Read: tba

Week IX: Cornucopia Utopia

A. Sweetness and Power
   1. Global underpinnings of Abundance

B. Sadness of Sweetness

Read: tba
Presentations of projects in sections

Week  X: Selected Student Projects Presented in Lecture

ASSIGNMENTS:  Essay 1:  20%
               Essay 2:  20%
               (All essays must include substantial and compelling evidence of revision [i.e., the writing cycle])
               Readings, lectures, discussions: 20%
               Project/Essay 3: 30%
               Final exam: 10%

All writing assignments should demonstrate a serious and detailed engagement with readings and with topics and questions broached in lecture and discussion.

Assignment #1: Offer a clear, coherent and compelling thesis on some, if not all of the following questions: With regard to the transformations wrought by the Industrial Revolutions, have we made progress? Whose “we”? Are the benefits worth the costs? Do those who pay the highest costs of progress also reap its greatest benefits? Who can speak with authority on such a question? Can we speak for the dead? Are we warranted in thinking of Frankenstein’s monster as an allegory for the humanity “alienated” by industrialized mechanization, and if so, what does this suggest about how we ought to think about the costs and benefits arising out of the Industrial Revolutions?

Assignment #2: Offer a clear, coherent and compelling thesis on some, if not all of the following questions: relative to their machines, have human beings become “other”? Stated otherwise, has human volition and autonomy been subjugated to the autonomy of our machines? (Provide some historical context to clarify the meaning and relevance of these questions (i.e., Industrial Rev., Total War)). Some other questions you might consider: Are concerns about the relationships between human and machines as depicted in dystopian science fiction literature and films, warranted in terms of our actual human experience? For instance, is Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 merely a work of futuristic, dystopian science fiction, or is it an allegory of the actual human condition, and so, what is the allegory about?

Assignment #3: In conjunction with the other members of your discussion groups, agree upon a literary form (e.g., letter, play, poem, short story, essay) for communicating to those both inside and outside your group, the details and revelations of your project. Whatever form is decided upon, your composition should grapple with the challenges and insights conveyed in the text Days of War and Nights of Love.

Project: each discussion section should form into two groups. The task is for one group to host (for a dinner party or comparable sort of formal gathering) the other group in such a way that minimizes as much as possible the use of machines of any sort, both in the processing, preparation, and presentation of food and drink, and in the creation of the overall physical situation in which the gathering takes place. Conversely, the group that plays guest on the first occasion, will play host on a second occasion; in this gathering the use of machines should be maximized as part of the hosting process. Ideally, your project should be infused with the sort of speculative imagination evident in the classic science fiction stories we have used in the course, an imagination that, in others words, does not simply concern itself with what is, but with what may be.

* * * * *
Attendance Policy: One of our goals is to cultivate your ability and desire to engage one another in serious and sincere intellectual discourse. For this purpose we require your consistent attendance in lecture and discussion, and to this end—though it may seem rather Draconian—we will deduct a full letter grade for more than two unexcused absences. Also, for the purpose of encouraging promptness and, with it, respect for your fellow students, teaching assistants and instructors, attendance will generally be taken at the beginning of a class.