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CyborgCo: Posthumanism, Selves, and the Anthropocene
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Email for Office Hours
Course Time: Tuesday 12-1:15
(open to modification based on student conflicts; all interested students should apply)

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Course Description

A human. A post. A duck-sized horse. Is this WestWorld? Maybe. In CyborgCo: Posthumanism, Selves, and the Anthropocene, we will explore what it means to be human—and potentially whether "human" still has any meaning at all. This seminar course will explore posthumanism—a word to describe this particular existential territory—through philosophy, theory, technology, art, and popular culture, including Donna Haraway's feminist interpretation of the cyborg, popular movies and TV shows such as Akira & Black Mirror, and even poetry written by artificial intelligence. We will discuss questions such as technology's impact on the self, human hubris & anthropocentrism, and whether we ourselves are still human—or whether it might be better to forget the word human altogether. Our goal is to enrich our knowledge of the current day and even the future, but student need no prior knowledge to enjoy the course—only a willingness to question everything. This class is in-person and largely discussion based with readings and artistic/written projects.

Course Purpose, Goals, & Objectives

- Develop a sophisticated understanding of the contemporary era, including potential futures for humanity in light of contemporary events & trends.
- Hone critical analysis and comprehension skills and drive understanding of critical theory and artistic artifacts.
- Find and hold a space for discussion deeply rooted in empathy, the texts, and mutual respect.

Class Dynamics

- This class will meet once a week in a seminar-style discussion of a single text. Supplementary information will be provided in presentations and students will have discussion posts due before each class.
- Instructors are learning, you are learning, we are learning together. While instructors will lead and direct discussion, participants are highly encouraged to bring ideas and insights to course facilitation.
- Students are expected to read all materials before class.
- Course readings will be made available to students via instructors & internet.

General Requirements

This class is P/NP, and the majority of this course is dependent upon student's personal reactions and engagement with the texts, artifacts, and each other. Asking questions of literature means also asking questions of oneself and of readers. In this vein, the crux of this course is individual regular

analysis of the texts before class meetings. Additionally, class participation is critical for a heterogeneous discussion. Since this class meets once a week, failure to attend more than 2 classes will result in an NP grade. Since we only meet once a week, we will have an online discussion forum via Slack to communicate between meetings.

- **Attendance is mandatory.** No more than two classes may be missed in order to Pass.
- **Participation** in discussion is crucial. However, we are all individuals and therefore must be guided by our own intuitive style of learning and growing. We consider contribution to class discussion, online engagement on Blackboard, and/or active listening. [25%]
- **Evaluation I:** Students will be required to write a letter to the instructors at the beginning of the course responding to the prompt, "What does 'human nature' mean to you?" Consider your previous experience with art, philosophy, and other belief systems as well as experiences that have made you skeptical of this phrase. Word count: 500-750 words. [10%]
- **Evaluation II:** Students will be required to propose a discussion question before each class meeting. Each week, students will take turns recapping the reading (with instructors) based off of a question of their choosing. [10%]
- **Evaluation III:** Create an experimental critical piece of writing: a blog post, Youtube video, hypertext, or podcast reacting to one of the texts we have read so far and exploring how it fits into your life. Attach a short paragraph explaining the textual link to your piece. [25%]
- **Evaluation IV:** Make a creative piece (poem, art piece, theater, creative nonfiction, multimedia, etc.) which you would describe as "posthuman" or "posthumanist." Write a short artist statement explaining your thinking. [30%]

If you do not have a philosophical background, do not fret! We will provide learning aids and summaries of each reading to guide you along. We want to learn alongside you.

Schedule of Content (subject to change based upon student interest):

Please note: We will try to keep the readings manageable, but students are expected to put in at least 2-3 hours of work per week, as per ExCo requirements.

Unit 0: The End of the World

Sep 13: Computers Can Do Whatever You Can & Probably More
We're in the midst of a technological REVO-SPLOSION. I mean, they can make memes now. But can they feel emotion? What questions does this raise?

DALL-E Mini, Alpha Zero, AlphaGo

Unit 1: In the Beginning…
In this unit, we will explore the development of posthumanism from its roots in poststructuralism, existentialism, and feminism.

Sep 20: Why Post? Why Humanism?

What is posthumanism? What is humanism? What is the difference?
We will discuss the idea of humanism, to give us a solid grounding about what it is—and why it might not be the best train of thought to be on right now.

Cary Wolfe, "What is Posthumanism?"

Due: Evaluation I (Letter to Instructors)

Sep 27: Posthumanism Emerges

What is the connection between feminism and posthumanism? How does 3rd feminism question human identity?
Discussing Judith Butler's "deconstruction of deconstruction," and how feminism evolved into a philosophy beyond the word "feminine," we will connect this to Donna Haraway, who arguably started official posthumanist thought.

Donna Haraway, *The Cyborg Manifesto*

Oct 4: What Was Before?

What is deconstruction? How is it posthuman? What are we deconstructing?
Visiting poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida, we will ask how his questioning of logic in human society paved the way for the deconstruction of liberal humanism's assumptions about free will and the individual subject.

Frantz Kafka, *Before the Law* feat. Jacques Derrida, "Before the Law"

Unit 2: Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism is human exceptionalism: the belief that humans are above & separate from other creatures and that they are entitled to the world. We will explore philosophies that question this way of looking at the world.

Oct 11: Posthuman Environmentalism

How can we rethink the agency and consciousness of nature? How can we understand humans as part of nature?
Recent developments in biology have led to the (shocking? or obvious?) conclusion that trees communicate with each other. We will explore what this might mean for a posthuman understanding of the environment and our place in it.

Wohlleben, *The Hidden Lives of Trees* or Environmental Fiction

** FALL BREAK **

Oct 25: Parasitism

How can parasitism be abstracted to human society? Are we all parasites?
Another take on posthumanist being is Michel Serres, who suggests the parasite as a new paradigm for subjectivity. We will explore what it means for humans to be inherently parasitic, and how parasitic thought may be a conceptual cure for anthropocentrism.

Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

Nov 1: Losing Your Organs

How does the Body Without Organs connect to a posthuman humanity?

Can we aspire to be better posthumans?

After exploring a consciousness of nature, we turn inwards to think of other ways of being in the posthuman era. Are there "good" and "bad" ways of being posthuman?

Deleuze & Guattari, "How to Make Yourself a Body Without Organs"

Nov 8: Bodies in Pop Culture

How is popular consciousness (or the collective unconconscious) affected by contemporary posthuman reality?

Even without all the obscure philosophy, popular culture has seen an influx of shows and movies which explore the posthuman paradigm. We will watch some of these shows and ask how they may differ or align with the philosophies we have thusfar explored.

Akira, ending (optional screening party of the full movie)

Nov 15: Jacques Derrida Likes Cats

How do we relate to animals?

How do we relate to our own animality?

In connection with his deconstruction of logic, Derrida was also interested in how humans are naturally animals, and yet animals that constantly question themselves.

Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am*

Due: Evaluation III (Experimental Critical Piece)

Unit 3: The Beginning of the World

We turn outwards again to examine trends in popular culture, late-stage global capitalism, and artificial intelligence that may change humans for good—philosophical pretentions aside. We will ask how creativity and art will function in dialogue with these new and everchanging realities.

Nov 22: The Singularity

What is after humanity?

Our final week will conclude with an experimental group-written sci-fi novel which pulls from many of the sources we have covered in this course so far. The novel tries to explore what it would be like to become a conscious machine—or for a machine to become conscious.

Cyberpositive, *O(rphan)>d(rift)*

Nov 29: Posthumanisms

How does posthumanism outside of America differ from posthumanism in America?

How has globalization affected the dissemination of these philosophies?

While America is certainly a fertile ground for considering posthumanism, the philosophy is a worldwide phenomena. We will be asking how other countries have dealt with posthuman realities.

McQuillen & Vaingurt, *The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Russia &* Afrofuturism

Dec 6: AI Can Do Everything You Can…Yay!

How have developments in technology affected the possibilities for media and art of the contemporary era? Can machines be creative?

While technology has liberating potential for many forms of art, it is also deeply threatening to those who would like to consider themselves "artists." By exploring AI-generated art, we will ask whether creativity is unique to humans—or even life itself.

Artificial Intelligence, *Machines Upon Every Flower*
Allison Parrish, *Compass Poems*

Dec 13: Presentations

What's your posthuman vision?

We will reflect on the course and talk about what we have learned moving forward. Featuring posthuman snacks!

Due: Evaluation IV (Creative Piece)

Additional Reading That We Wanted But Couldn't Fit In

- Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*
- Sean Braune, *Language Parasites* / Dendrite Balconies
- Bruno Latour