2013

Bodies of Debt: Interrogating the Costs of Technological Progress, Scientific Advancement, and Social Conquests through Dystopian Literature

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/melissa_ames/7/
Fabricating the Body:  
Effects of Obligation and Exchange  
in Contemporary Discourse

Edited by

Sarah Himsel Burcon

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS Publishing
This book is dedicated to my children:
Lucas, Jacob, and Nicole
CHAPTER SIX

BODIES OF DEBT:
INTERROGATING THE COSTS
OF TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS, SCIENTIFIC
ADVANCEMENT, AND SOCIAL CONQUESTS
THROUGH DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE

MELISSA AMES

The Umbrella Concept: Using Dystopian Texts to Promote Social Responsibility

Educational institutes have long been associated with the role of teaching social responsibility. By definition, social responsibility is “a personal investment in the well-being of people and the planet” (Berman 15). However, despite the fact that many feel that public schools and universities are ideal sites for this type of training, research has found that many instructors are reluctant to discuss controversial issues within their classrooms because of the potential negative ramifications. A recent study found that only “11% of students reported spending time in their classes on ‘problems facing the country today’” (Wolk 667). Further research has found that such issues “receive little attention in schools because in the culture of schooling, and the culture of society, many controversial topics and issues are taboo” (Evans, Avery, and Pederson 295). These cultural taboos impose severe disabilities on teaching and thinking” and ultimately impact the decisions instructors make concerning course content and classroom management (Evans, Avery, and Pederson 295).

When instructors do go against the societal grain and merge such subject matter into their courses, some common issues surface. Brian K. Payne and Randy R. Gainey describe two likely scenarios that instructors will be faced with when controversial topics are at the center of classroom discussion: “(a) a small number of students may want to voice their
opinions at the expense of excluding other students, or (b) all of the
students may simply avoid eye contact and hope the professor will not
make them talk about their ideas” (55). To further complicate the situation,
other factors can also impact how likely a class is to engage in critical
thinking practices surrounding social topics. Payne and Gainey explain
that various “gender and demographic differences” may “affect an
individual’s beliefs and attitudes toward many controversial issues,” as
well as their willingness to openly discuss their views (55).

Despite these difficulties, studies have found that there are numerous
benefits to crafting a course that forces students to engage in such critical
inquiry. Research finds that the study of controversial topics, if discussed
within an open and supportive classroom environment, promotes
“increased political interest and civic tolerance and decreased dogmatism”
(Evans, Avery, and Pederson 297). In “Teaching Supercharged Subjects,”
David Pace, an Associate Professor in the History Department at Indiana
University, discussed a challenging course he taught on “The Dawn of the
Atomic Age.” Throughout many of his first attempts at teaching this
course, he found that students quickly “began to assume uncharacteristically
extreme positions, and conflicts within the class threatened to poison
interactions for the remainder of the course” (Pace 42). Pace was further
troubled by the way the students’ unwavering views affected him as a
teacher. He writes, “the extreme nature of many students’ comments
pushed my ‘buttons,’ and the emotional and intellectual chaos of the
argument made me less effective as an agent of critical thinking” (Pace
42). Ultimately he was able to restructure the class so that it produced
more favorable results, and he highlights ten strategies that ultimately
worked to produce a more productive classroom atmosphere. Some of
these strategies include: providing students with the necessary skills to
engage with the debate (e.g. analyzing a question from multiple
perspectives, supporting an argument with research); setting the foundation
for the controversial issue and controlling the instructional pace (e.g.
exposing students to a controversial topic slowly and incrementally); and
managing the classroom dynamic and conversation (e.g. ensuring the
conversation stems from the students but intervening as necessary and
making sure that logic rather than emotion motivates arguments) (Pace 43-
45). Other best practices for tackling tricky topics within classroom study
include creating an inquiry unit where the teacher begins with a question,
or set of questions, that connects the various topics of discussion and
textual analysis (Wolk 666). This allows the overarching thematic focus of
the class, more so than the individual topics of conflict, to be the
foundation to build upon. This umbrella places various debates in dialogue
with one another and broadens the conversation, while it also helps to
prevent students from disengaging if one specific topic is not appealing to
them. Another crucial component to crafting a successful course that
encourages social responsibility is text selection. Payne and Gainey
courage instructors to select texts that engage students in critical
thinking about social issues because they provide a specific context in
which to explore a larger social critique (57). This is where fictional
narratives – particularly those entrenched in the utopian and dystopian
tradition – can be extremely useful.

Discussing novels in particular, Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry argue
that dystopian literature “encourages people to view their society with a
critical eye, sensitizing or predisposing them to political action” (7). They
suggest that “exposure to these types of texts can lead young readers to see
inequality in their own communities and countries” (Hintz and Ostry 8).
Scholars such as Jacqueline N. Glasgows encourage utilizing dystopian
novels in social justice units, arguing that “social justice education has the
potential to prepare citizens who are sophisticated in their understanding
of diversity and group interaction, able to critically evaluate social
institutions, and committed to working democratically with diverse others”
(Glasgows 54). Similarly, Steven Wolk believes that reading dystopian
novels allows “students to question the world we have and envision a
better world we could have” because these texts “offer unique
opportunities to teach these habits of mind” (668). Although these stories
are often set in the future, usually in post-apocalyptic settings, Wolk argues
that “thematically they are really about the present” (668).

This essay discusses the successes and challenges of teaching a
particular cross-curricular course that focused on controversial issues
appearing in scientific research and dystopian literature. The course studied
narratives that wrestle with ethical concerns surrounding “progress”
societal achievements, technological advancement, scientific discoveries,
and so forth. Contemporary debates and specific issues addressed
throughout this course included cloning, stem cell research, black market
organ transplants, human trafficking, surveillance technology, euthanasia,
and capital punishment. In alignment with research concerning best
practices in teaching social responsibility topics, this course was centered
on a set of inquiry questions that stretched across all units, texts, and
discussions. It also utilized narratives as the site of inquiry – as the safe
space in which to wrestle with these controversial issues. In this class
students analyzed various fictional dystopian texts (novels, film, and
television) that critique the above-mentioned issues, and class discussion
revolved around the following questions: what do we do when human
survival and societal progress come at extreme costs, and how might such advancements question our faith in humanity? The theme of indebted bodies - bodies created by technology, dependent on technology, governed by technology, or punished by technology - was present in all of the literary and media texts students covered. This motif was studied in the following novels and short stories: Brian Aldiss's "Super Toys," MT Anderson’s *Feed*, Isaac Asimov’s *I, Robot*, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Philip K. Dick’s “Minority Report,” Cory Doctorow’s *Little Brother*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, and Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies*, as well as in contemporary film companion texts, such as *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, *I, Robot*, *Minority Report*, *The Life of David Gayle*, *The Island*, and *Repo Men*.

The Student Body: Understanding Course Objectives and Desired Outcomes

This course was designed as a general education literature class for undergraduate students. The normal composition of such a class is 20-25 students, primarily non-English majors of sophomore or junior status. The course objectives were designed so that by the end of the semester students would be able to demonstrate the following skills:

1. Read fiction and nonfiction texts that exhibit a wide range of cultural perspectives and values, and develop abilities to think critically and write analytically about them.
2. Engage in reading and writing experiences about literature in order to demonstrate an increased understanding or an appreciation for social, cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic ideas and their discovery.
3. Develop research skills, including effective use of source materials and the principles of documentation, and apply those skills to the study of literature and media analysis.
4. Understand the relationship that narratives have to one another (despite differences in media or genre) and to the cultural/social/historical milieu in which they are created, produced, and consumed.
5. Analyze thematic variations across media and genre in order to determine the effects of narrative format.
6. Apply research from outside disciplines (e.g., science, law, ethics) to the study of literature, film, television, and other artifacts from popular culture.

7. Work collaboratively in order to explore ideas, formulate arguments, and present findings in a scholarly fashion.

While these were the objectives articulated on the syllabus, the course also aimed to teach social responsibility - an outcome not as easily measured as those listed above.

Dissecting a Course Design: Applying Literary Studies to Science, Law, and Medicine

This course was divided into three thematic units: 1) Exploring the Consequences of Technological Progress; 2) Critiquing the Changing Justice System; and 3) Ethical Debates within Science and Medicine. Each unit was further divided into sub-units focused on specific technological advances or instances of human progress. These sub-units contained textual sets where students analyzed the topic of focus within a literary work, film, and various non-fiction texts from contemporary discourse.

Exploring the Consequences of Technological Progress

As the first unit of the semester, which established the overarching focus of the course and helped to build crucial student skills, this was the longest. This seven-week unit focused on a variety of sub-units that were in dialogue with one another. Students began the course with a sub-unit critiquing human dependence on technology. They began by reading scholarly critiques of the digital generation - Nicholas Carr’s "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" and Mark Bauerlein’s *The Dumbest Generation*. These non-fiction articles functioned as preliminary readings for M.T. Anderson’s *Feed*, a novel that explores (and exaggerates) these scholars’ very concerns. *Feed*, a young adult dystopian novel, is set in the future, and showcases a world completely dependent on technology. The most prominent example of this is "the feed" - a computing chip inserted into the brain that allows one to be constantly connected to a stream of information (an advanced version of our Internet). Throughout the novel, Anderson displays the consequences of this technology (and others), such as the lessening of intelligence and independent thought, highlighted through the constant use of slang, frequent statements of ignorance, and the depiction of educational institutes run solely for corporate profit. This sub-unit required students to research issues such as the effects of social networking on communication and human relations and the consequences of living in a consumerist culture.
Students then shifted into a different, although related, sub-unit on robotics. As in the previous sub-unit, students debated the benefits and detriments of technology, interrogating the question “how far is too far” with reference to technological innovations. In this sub-unit, students analyzed two sets of adaptations to see how the various creators carried out their social commentaries differently. Specifically, students read Brian Aldiss’s short story, “Super Toys,” viewed Steven Spielberg’s film A.I. Artificial Intelligence, critiqued select short stories from Isaac Asimov’s collection I, Robot, and then watched Alex Proyas’s film adaptation of the same name. Because both Spielberg and Proyas’s movies were very loose adaptations of the original literary works, students were prevented from falling into the trap of simply comparing and contrasting the plots of these texts. Yet, despite their different narrative threads, each text delved into the same theme concerning technology. “Super Toys” and A.I. focus on the creation of a robotic child programmed to love its human “parents.” To varying degrees, these texts delve into the moral question of whether such a creation is humane and what, if any, responsibility humans would then have to love their adopted robots in return. Both the print and film versions of I, Robot, explore different consequences of a world reliant on robotic technology – specifically the potential for technology to evolve beyond humans’ control. In conjunction with this sub-unit, students researched existing technologies, such as current attempts to achieve artificial intelligence, and analyzed the implications these technologies might have on human civilization.

The third sub-unit focused on technology’s ability to manipulate and control human bodies. In this section, students studied one young adult novel and one canonical novel, each of which inquires into this issue in different ways. In Scott Westerfeld’s Uglies (the first of his four-part young adult series), readers are presented with a post-apocalyptic world in which all human problems have seemingly been erased. As is the typical dystopian formula, this world is depicted as a utopia before its dark underside is revealed. In this society, all persons undergo an operation at the age of sixteen that turns them “pretty” – erasing all physical imperfections and eliminating the issues the previous era had with racial inequality or unfair competitions based on cultural beauty standards. Unknown to the citizens who undergo this procedure, they also obtain lesions on their brains that alter their ability to think critically (which, ultimately, is the reason there are no longer conflicts; it is not the even playing field of biological beauty that has erased all confrontation but the inability to hold divergent views and independent thoughts). In this portion of the sub-unit, students researched the consequences of media imagery and current trends concerning cosmetic procedures in order to discuss how this text critiques contemporary societal beauty standards.

The next novel students studied was Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World, which depicts the body not simply altered by technology, but the body as created by technology – more specifically, advanced reproductive technology. Huxley crafts a world in which humans are designed and reared into various caste systems, receiving physical and mental traits based on their social hierarchy and utility, as well as various privileges linked to their social standing. Like many of the texts studied in this first large unit, the society depicted in this novel strategically controls its population through distraction. (Some examples within the novel include required recreational sex and mandatory drug use). Together, Brave New World and Uglies allow students to question the potential consequences that could accompany a government’s strategic use of technological advancements.

**Critiquing the Changing Justice System**

The second half of the semester contained two shorter – and more narrowly focused – units. The first unit explored the ways in which bodies are monitored, controlled, and punished under the current justice system. Students read Philip K. Dick’s short story, “The Minority Report,” and viewed Steven Spielberg’s film adaptation. The shared narrative features a futuristic world in which a pre-crime unit is in place; due to its superb functioning, it has eliminated homicide. This pre-crime unit works by exploiting the psychic abilities of three pre-cogs – humans with the ability to predict with relative accuracy the homicidal impulses of humans. Studying these texts allowed students to continue to address issues such as bodily exploitation (through the treatment of the pre-cogs), at the same time that they interrogated the justice system as a whole, especially one that becomes increasingly more dependent on technology to locate and punish criminals. From this textual set, students moved to two works that evoke contemporary debates concerning the justice system. Corey Doctorow’s post-9/11 young adult novel, Little Brother, is an obvious critique of the United States Patriot Act. Students read this novel, viewed selected clips from Tony Scott’s (pre-9/11) film, Enemy of the State, and researched the Patriot Act in order to debate issues such as privacy rights, governmental surveillance procedures, and homeland security.

The second contemporary debate students were involved in during this unit surrounds capital punishment. This well-trodden controversial topic is explored through student research along with Alan Parker’s film, The Life
of David Gale. Parker’s movie follows the trial of a man wrongfully accused of murder and his resulting death sentence. The film concludes with viewers realizing that the victim had actually committed suicide because she was facing a terminal illness. The two collaborated in her “assisted suicide,” knowing full well that he would likely be tried for murder. As opponents of the death penalty, they were hoping that this case would prove its fallibility. Following this film, students presented research on the contemporary debates surrounding both capital punishment and euthanasia (or, specifically, physician-assisted suicide).

**Ethical Debates within Science and Medicine**

The final unit of the course is by far the most eclectic of all, housing debates central to science and medicine, as well as religion and politics. Beginning with the former, students read Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel, *Never Let Me Go*, and viewed Michael Bay’s *The Island*, in order to enter into contemporary debates about the ethics of cloning. Students researched this specific issue and other related medical debates, such as those surrounding stem cell research. Students then moved on to study advanced reproductive technology and sexual exploitation. The class read Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which features a main character living under the futuristic totalitarian Christian theocracy that has replaced the United States government. Her role is that of a concubine (a “handmaid”) kept for reproductive purposes within the household of a ruling class family who suffers, as does the society at large, from fertility problems. In perhaps the greatest narrative reach of the semester, this novel is then connected to current global atrocities such as human sex trafficking. Continuing on with the focus of the exploited body, students viewed Miguel Sapoznik’s *Repo Men*, a film which portrays a futuristic world in which corporations take advantage of the ill, allowing people to buy artificial organs on credit. Students then related real world issues concerning black market organ sales.

**Textual Connections: Developing the Skill Synthesize Social Critiques**

One of the primary goals of this literature class was to make textual associations, primarily in the form of text-to-text and text-to-world connections. Quite obviously, the units and sub-units prompted students to analyze various related storylines – texts that shared some basic narrative thread (content) or social critique (theme). However, it also turned out to be very important for students to make connections between texts studied in different portions of the class. The following is an example of three overarching issues dealt with during the course, and some textual analysis of the works that highlighted them.

**The Consequences of Advanced Technology**

One theme that students studied pertained to the consequences of advanced technology. In their early readings, they were forced to entertain the arguments of academics who specifically critique their generation’s dependency on technology.

We have entered the Information Age, traveled down the Information Superhighway, spawned a Knowledge Economy, undergone the Digital Revolution, converted manual workers into knowledge workers, and promoted a Creative Class, and we anticipate a Conceptual Age to be... And yet, while teens and young adults have absorbed digital tools into their daily lives like no other age group, while they have grown up with more knowledge and information readily at hand, taken more classes, built their own Web sites, enjoyed more libraries, bookstores, and museums in their towns and cities... in sum, while the world has provided them extraordinary chances to gain knowledge and improve their reading/writing skills, not to mention offering financial incentives to do so, young Americans today are no more learned or skillful than their predecessors, no more knowledgeable, fluent, up-to-date, or inquisitive, except in the materials of youth culture. (Baurelein 8-9)

Baurelein forcefully argues: “all the ingredients are in place for making an informed and intelligent citizen – but it’s not happening” (10). He laments the current societal conditions: “instead of opening young American minds to the stores of civilization and science and politics, technology has contracted their horizon to themselves, to the social scene around them. Young people have never been so intensely mindful of and present to one another, so enabled in adolescent contact” (Baurelein 10). Baurelein’s criticisms align well with the social commentary provided in *Feed*. After only hours of being disconnected from the feed, the main character, Titus, begins complaining about its disappearance through an interior monologue that showcases just how crucial he and his peers feel this technological apparatus is to their daily existence:

I missed the feed. I don’t know when they first had feeds. Like maybe, fifty or a hundred years ago. Before that, they had to use their hands and their eyes. Computers were all outside the body. They carried them around
outside of them, in their hands, like if you carried your lungs in a briefcase and opened it to breathe. (Anderson 47)

In this course students were trained to study not only the actual content of the narratives but their form as well. Both Anderson’s *Feed* and Westerfeld’s *Uglies* perform their social commentary about the negative effects of technology through various formal techniques. Both authors draw upon informal diction (the use of slang and improper syntax) to highlight the ignorance of the characters within their novels.

Meanwhile, other texts studied throughout the term focus more on the potentially detrimental effects technology could have on human relations rather than intellect. In “Super Toys,” Aldiss includes the speech of a CEO promoting the launch of his newest robotic creation: a serving-man, which he promised would help millions who suffer from increased loneliness and isolation. The serving-man will increase their quality of life because “he will always answer, and the most vapid conversation cannot bore him... personal isolation will then be banished” (Aldiss 198).

In a slightly different focus, the various short stories from *I, Robot*, as well as “Super Toys,” *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, and the film adaptation of *I, Robot*, tackle the moral question of whether we want to create emotional bonds between humans and robots. Spielberg’s *A.I.*, addresses this issue by aligning viewers’ sympathies with the main character, David, a robotic boy. Throughout the film David seeks to secure the love of his human adopted mother, not understanding that doing so is a near impossibility. In a telling scene, a fellow robot tries to demonstrate to David why this love is unattainable:

She loves what you do for her... but she does not love you... she cannot love you. You are neither flesh, nor blood. You are not a dog, a cat, or a canary. You were designed and built specific, like the rest of us. And you are alone now only because they tired of you, or replaced you with a younger model, or were displeased with something you said, or broke. They made us too smart, too quick, and too many. We are suffering for the mistakes they made because when the end comes, all that will be left is us. That's why they hate us. (*A.I.*)

The closing lines of this speech speak to another motif surfacing in many of the texts: to what extent would humans go if they felt their security or their very existence was threatened by their technological creations? Although most of the narratives studied in class showcased worlds in which people have embraced and become dependent on technology, some texts also included moments in which we see subgroups who protest against the technological advances. *A.I.* features a graphic scene where humans torture robots at a “Flesh Fair”; *I, Robot* portrays a main character, Detective Del Spooner (Will Smith), who is accused of robot bigotry; and Asimov’s short story collection includes extended commentary about the fears and biases against robots – specifically through the discussion of the Society for Humanity.

**The Effects of Technology on the Environment**

Another thematic thread surfacing throughout many of the narratives studied in this course was the effects that technological advancements have on the environment. Although many narratives touch on this theme briefly, the novel that most explicitly does so is Anderson’s *Feed.* Throughout the novel the declining state of Earth is shown through depictions of suburbs existing under protective domes; dead seas that can only be visited when wearing protective suits; and discussions of national parks being eliminated in order to build air factories (Anderson 88, 129, 179). Anderson is clearly critiquing human waste at various points in his novel in sometimes comical and sometimes serious ways. One ridiculous scene finds the main character’s mother and brother crinkling up “the disposable table” so that it can be thrown away after just one use (Anderson 129). And in a more emotional scene toward the end of the novel, the father of a dying girl makes this enraged speech about the wasteful practices of American citizens: “We Americans are interested only in the consumption of our products. We have no interest in how they were produced, or what happens to them once we discard them, once we throw them away” (Anderson 290).

This theme of waste surfaces in Aldiss’s short story as well, in a key moment from the CEO’s speech:

Though three-quarters of the overcrowded world are starving, we are lucky here to have more than enough, thanks to population control. Obesity’s our problem, not malnutrition. I guess there’s nobody round this table who hasn’t got a Crosswell working for him in the small intestine, a perfectly safe tape-worm that enables its host to eat up to fifty per cent more food and still keep his or her figure. Right? (195)

The various films viewed throughout the term show the consequences of human waste as only a visual display can. The most striking of these are the closing scenes of *A.I.*, which depict a destroyed vision of New York City, first in ruins and later under water. The film ends with a scene two thousand years in the future – long past the end of humanity during a time in which aliens reside on Earth and humans cease to exist.
The Costs of Cultural Beauty Standards

A less serious, but perhaps more timely, societal critique surfacing throughout many of these narratives is the effects of the media on society. Westerfeld’s series grounds its commentary on the current surge in cosmetic surgery and offers “an impetus for an important dialogue about beauty standards and our culture’s” captivation with them (Scott and Dragoo 11). In one scene the main character of Uglies, Tally, is flipping through old celebrity magazines from the “Rusty Era” (a period meant to refer to our contemporary times). Her interior monologue demonstrates how drastically she and her contemporaries have been brainwashed into believing that physical differences amount to only imperfections:

She’d never seen so many wildly different faces before. Mouths and eyes and noses of every imaginable shape, all combined insanely on people of every age. And the bodies. Some were grotesquely fat, or weirdly over muscled, or uncomfortably thin, and almost all of them had wrong, ugly proportions. But instead of being ashamed of their deformities, the people were laughing and kissing and posing, as if all the pictures had been taken at some huge party. (Westerfeld 198)

This topic is broached in Feed also. In this novel Anderson depicts the characters as being mindless trend followers, quickly running off to change their hairstyles or self-mutilate their bodies if the current fashion trend demands it. In an interview with James Blasingame, Anderson notes that, in addition to serving as a cautionary tale about the misuse of technology, his novel was intended to scrutinize the current culture of instant gratification, aspects of herd psychology, and individuals’ refusal to tackle serious societal problems (4).

Cross-Curricular Connections: A Sampling of Assignments & Assessments

Textual connections are at the center of this course’s focus, and the assessments in this class strived to show mastery of these as well as traditional literary analysis, research, and writing skills. These assessments also intended to demonstrate the critical thinking skills necessary for academic accomplishments across disciplines. Students completed four primary assignments and two exams throughout this 15-week course. The first two assignments are the most “traditional,” while the other two highlight an attention to genre and interdisciplinary boundary blurring not always found in an introductory literature class.

Response Journal

Students completed this ongoing project throughout the semester in order to document their careful reading and literary analysis, as well as their attentive viewing of in-class films. The goal of this collection of essays was to assist them in completing other course work (essays/projects) and to help them prepare for their exams (midterm/final). Therefore, students were asked to craft a 1-2 page entry for each literary work we read and each film we viewed in class. They were encouraged to use these entries during our class discussion when called upon to participate in the analysis of the narrative. These entries were to be formatted according to the requirements listed in the below table.

Format for Literary Responses: For each entry devoted to a print text you should include the following components:

- Bibliographic Citation (formatted according to MLA – see OWL Purdue’s website for assistance)
- 1-2 paragraph Summary of the text (a brief synopsis of the story in your own words)
- 1-2 paragraph Analysis section (a discussion of the text’s importance, overall message, and the social critique implicit within the narrative)
- Explication of a key passage or set of related quotes (you should type out a substantial section of the text – an important paragraph – or a few linked quotations and then discuss its/their importance in relation to the text as a whole; you should include the page numbers for these quotations, cited according to MLA with parenthetical citations.)
- Discussion Questions (a list of at least 10 questions/issues that you would like to discuss/pose – these can be general questions, but more useful might be questions that point to specific moments in the text that were interesting/confusing; it is suggested that you include potential page numbers to turn to when discussing your question.)

Format for Film Responses: For each entry devoted to a film you should include the following components:

- Bibliographic Citation (formatted according to MLA – see OWL Purdue’s website for assistance)
- 1-2 paragraph Summary of the text (a brief synopsis of the storyline in your own words)
• 1-2 paragraph Analysis section (a discussion of the text's importance, overall message, and the social critique implicit within the narrative)

• Explication of a key scene or set of related scenes (in order to do this you will need to take detailed notes during the viewing experience; you may type out an important moment of dialogue or a few linked quotations and then discuss its/their importance in relation to the text as a whole, or, alternately, you can describe in great detail an important scene focusing on more than just the spoken words, attending to filmic devices (editing, lighting, sound, setting, camera angles, special effects), discussing the effectiveness or effects of these devices (how they worked on the audience, what they intended to do, how they further the narrative and/or the director's message)

• Discussion Questions (a list of at least 10 questions/issues that you would like to discuss/pose – these can be general questions, but more useful might be specific moments in the film that were interesting/confusing.)

Fig. 1.1: Criteria for Response Journal Entries

Although these response journals were collected periodically throughout the semester for progress checks and informal feedback, they were ultimately assessed as a whole when they were formally submitted for a grade. Students were then assessed based on the four major skill areas described above (summary, analysis, explication, and questioning) and in three more procedure-orientated categories (language and mechanics; layout and bibliographical citation; and completeness and preparation).

Literary Analysis Essay

The second rather standard assignment given to this class was that of a traditional literary analysis essay. Students were asked to craft a research paper integrating outside source material to formulate an argument concerning how a controversial issue is addressed through various narratives. They were to study how these fictional texts provided a social commentary and/or critique about this issue. They were further directed to tackle the overarching questions posed by the class: 1) what ethical concerns surround the area of “progress” explored in their chosen narratives (societal achievements, technological advancement, scientific discoveries, etc.); 2) what these narratives suggest we do when human survival and societal progress come at extreme costs; and 3) how might such advancements question our faith in humanity? This essay was assigned at midterm in order to ensure that students were mastering the material and the skills of the course. The breadth of this essay (with its overarching topic and analysis of multiple texts) was a nice contrast to the more narrowly focused assignments of the course.

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<td>media/genre characteristics.</td>
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<td>various media/genre, little analysis</td>
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<td><strong>Comprehension</strong></td>
<td>Does not demonstrate an</td>
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<td>understanding of the narratives and</td>
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<td>utilized.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Problems with basic research. Under length requirements. Most or all sources are questionable. Does not show understanding of controversial issue.</td>
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<td>(5, 7, 8, 10)</td>
<td>Research meets basic requirements. Some questionable sources. Shows some understanding of controversial issue. All sources are scholarly and worthy of study. Shows thorough understanding of controversial issue.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Clarity / Logic</th>
<th>Writer has problems organizing information. The ability to form &amp; support arguments is not demonstrated.</th>
<th>Writer has some ability to organize information but falters some with clarity in proving and supporting arguments.</th>
<th>Writer is able to organize information and make clear arguments, most of which are supported by examples from the texts.</th>
<th>Writer is able to efficiently organize information &amp; formulate logical, clear arguments with ample textual support.</th>
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<th>Synthesis of Material</th>
<th>Does not demonstrate mastery of synthesis writing. Material unconnected.</th>
<th>Demonstrates the ability to synthesize material to some extent.</th>
<th>Demonstrates the ability to synthesize material with a solid outcome.</th>
<th>Demonstrates the ability to synthesize material efficiently.</th>
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<th>Language Usage</th>
<th>Lower-level writing. Overall, simple sentences and basic wording. Problems with basic writing conventions.</th>
<th>Decent writing showcased here. Some variety with wording but simple sentences prevail.</th>
<th>Good overall writing. Well worded with a solid amount of sentence variation.</th>
<th>College-level writing. Excellent word variation and complex sentence structure.</th>
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**Mechanics**

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**MLA**

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<th>Does not show mastery of MLA format. Multiple errors and misuse.</th>
<th>Some problems with understanding MLA format. Some errors and misuse.</th>
<th>Demonstrates basic mastery of MLA format. A few errors and misuse.</th>
<th>Demonstrates high-level mastery of MLA formats. Very minor errors present.</th>
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Fig. 1.2 Scoring Rubric for Literary Analysis Essay

Multi-Genre Research Project

While the literary analysis essay asked students to pair texts, the final assessment of the course, the multi-genre research project, allowed students to focus their study on one text alone. Also, while all of the other formal assignments found students writing in traditional academic genres, this assignment allowed them to create a multimodal composition demonstrating advanced research skills through various writing items and creative pieces. In order to showcase a comprehensive understanding of one selected work/pairing, students created projects that creatively captured the literary work’s overall narrative, theme, and social commentary. While a traditional exam or essay could have met the same goals, this allowed students a bit more freedom and flexibility when relaying their understanding and investment in the text. This assignment encouraged students to apply their knowledge of the primary text to a variety of genres (written and visual), thus creating a meta-narrative about the work.

From this description it might appear that students had endless choices when it came to the construction of their final projects; however, this was not actually the case. Students were directed to choose one genre from various categories – categories specifically selected to demonstrate different skills and levels of comprehension. Students were encouraged to select the genre within each category that allowed them to most fully showcase their understanding of the text. In the end, they had crafted seven unique pieces for inclusion in their projects. The table below contains the genre selections and categories they had at their disposal.

**A. Newspaper Component:** Students will compose an item that would appear in a fictional newspaper published in the hometown/area of the narrative text. This item should conform with the genre in question in
terms of content, length, tone, and layout.

**CHOOSE ONE OPTION FROM BELOW:**

*Obituary:* a brief (1/2 or 1 page) blurb about the death of a character from the narrative. This could take place during the narrative or in some perceived (fictional/extended) future. Relevant details from his/her life should be present.

*Letter to the Editor:* a 1-2 page (double-spaced) letter taking a stand on an issue that occurred within the text. (Note: this cannot be the same issue explored in the research section below).

*Advice Column:* a 2-part advice column (from the character seeking advice and the fictional expert responding to it). The content of the entry posed by the narrative's character should pull from the storyline and should fit his/her personality.

*Front Page Feature Story:* a 2 page (double-spaced) article highlighting a key event that took place in the narrative – something that would be "front page" news. This should be fashioned after a real newspaper and should start with an attention grabbing title, important information up front, and it should address all the important W's (who, what, when, where, and why).

*Personal Advertisement:* a brief personal (dating) advertisement for one of the characters in the text. This should conform to genre standards/length and should fit the character’s disposition.

*Other (see instructor for approval)*

**B. Artistic Analysis Piece:** Students will select a literary/cultural artifact that a) is intended to capture the essence of the narrative text (i.e. a book jacket cover) or b) they feel represents/captures the essence of the narrative text (i.e. an unrelated text that they feel aligns well with text of study). This item can be found (but then should be cited properly) or originally crafted. Accompanying this piece should be a 1 paragraph justification of why this artifact does (or does not) fit the narrative of study.

**CHOOSE ONE OPTION FROM BELOW:**

*Poetry* (found or original)
*Music Lyrics* (found or original)
*Product/Company Advertisement* (found or original)
*Book Cover/Jacket* (original design or written analysis/comparison of two different versions in print)
*Movie Poster* (original design or analysis of published poster’s design)
*Other (see instructor for approval)*

**C. Visual Artistic Application Piece:** Students will select a piece of visual art that they feel represents/captures the essence of the narrative text. This item can be found (but then should be cited properly) or originally crafted. Accompanying this piece should be a 1 paragraph justification of why this visual fits the narrative of study.

**CHOOSE ONE OPTION FROM BELOW:**

*Photograph* (found or original)
*Sketch/Drawing* (found or original)
*Political Cartoon* (found or original)
*Other (see instructor for approval)*

**D. Character Insight Piece:** Students will craft an item that provides insight into one of the characters from the text. This item will require close reading and a review of the narrative in order to select specific characteristics, behaviors, descriptions, etc. Using direct quotes/paraphrases is suggested.

**CHOOSE ONE OPTION FROM BELOW:**

*Journal/Diary Entry:* a 1-2 page (single-spaced) entry (or set of entries) from a character’s perspective detailing a moment from the narrative from his/her vantage point.

*Facebook Page:* a mock Facebook page for a character including relevant biographical details, likes, friends, and posts. Some of this material should stem directly from the text but others can be inferred based on his/her personality.

*Vanity License Plate:* a realistically designed vanity license plate (use proper layout) that would represent the character’s personality. Attached to this artistic piece should be a 1 paragraph justification of why this vanity plate fits his/her persona as showcased in the narrative.

*Text Message/IM exchange:* a 1-2 page (single-spaced) transcript for a text message or IM exchange between two characters. The contents of this narrative must be loosely based on the narrative but embellishments are allowed as long as they fit the characters participating in the conversation.

*Other (see instructor for approval)*

**E. Informational Essay:** Students will write in an established genre relevant to book production/review. Proper organization, tone, mechanics, and proofreading are expected.
CHOOSE ONE OPTION FROM BELOW:

**Book Review:** a 1-2 page (double-spaced) evaluation essay written in the form of a book review that might be published in a newspaper, magazine, or website. Although some summary will be present, this should be balanced against critique and commentary. Be careful not to be "spoiler" heavy for the audience's sake.

**Back of Book Synopsis:** a 1-2 page (double-spaced) summary of the book as would be found on the rear side of a published text. This summary should serve to entice readers, encouraging them to buy/read the text, but should not spoil key plot points (such as the ending).

**Compare/Contrast:** a 2-3 page (double-spaced, MLA formatted) compare & contrast essay discussing the print narrative against its film counterpart. (For texts other than "Minority Report," this requires an outside film viewing of the adaptations of the works).

**F. Research Component I. (Traditional Essay):** Students will demonstrate synthesis writing and documentation skills through a traditional essay formatted according to MLA standards.

CHOOSE ONE OPTION FROM BELOW:

**Author Biography:** a 2-3 page essay about the author (using proper MLA citation & at least 3 scholarly sources)

**Book's Reception:** a 2-3 page essay discussing the book's reception/popularity/reviews (using proper MLA citation & at least 3 sources – source types will vary)

**Literary Analysis:** a 2-3 page essay integrating scholarly research (journal articles), analyzing a key aspect of the text (MLA citation required)

**G. Research Component II. (Applied Research Item):** Students will demonstrate the ability to research a controversial issue (one highlighted in the text) in order to provide a social commentary (similar or opposite as to that found in the text). Regardless of the option selected below, include a works cited page for this section that lists all of the sources you consulted when crafting this piece.

CHOOSE ONE OPTION FROM BELOW:

**Public Service Announcement** (as would be used by one side of issue in narrative): a public service announcement (print advertisement, faux billboard, commercial, video) advocating for one side of the controversial issue researched (must use material from research).

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**Bodies of Debt**

*Poster/Flier/Brochure Advocating One Side of Issue*: a print item meant for display/distribution that one side of the issue (supporter or opposition) would utilize to publicize his/her stance on the issue (must include material from research).

**PowerPoint Presentation about Debate**: a traditional PowerPoint presentation one might use if instructing a class on this controversial issue (must use material from research).

Fig. 1.3. Component Options for Multi-Genre Research Project

Students were assessed by scores earned in each of the seven categories listed above as well as two additional categories based on assembly and design (organization/design and mechanics/writing).

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**Group Research Presentation**

While most of the assessments throughout the course were based on individual accomplishments, one assignment students completed was based on group effort. This collaborative group project allowed students to study a contemporary controversy occurring in the fields of science, law, and/or ethics – one that has infiltrated mainstream media and popular culture. This cooperative learning activity required out of class meetings, research compilation, and a formal group presentation.

Students were able to select from ten different options, and they were placed into two or three person groups based on their interests. These presentations were staggered throughout the semester running from week two until week fourteen. The student presentations were strategically situated within the study of various print or media texts that explored the real-world issue they had studied. The options for research are listed in the table below.

**Group 1:** The Effects of Social Networking (on Human Relationships / Communication)

**Group 2:** Artificial Intelligence (The Progress & Potential Outcomes)

**Group 3:** Plastic Surgery (The Effects of Media Beauty Standards)

**Group 4:** Global Warming (Human Progress & Environmental Consequences)

**Group 5:** The Death Penalty (The Debates Concerning Legislation)

**Group 6:** The Patriot Act (Restricted Freedom, Surveillance, and National Security Issues)
Group 7: Assisted Suicide / Euthanasia (Ethical Debates & Mainstream Examples)
Group 8: Stem Cell Research (Scientific and Political Debates)
Group 9: Cloning (Scientific Accomplishments & Ethical Debates)
Group 10: Human Sex Trafficking (Global Instances & Ethical Debates)

Fig. 1.4. Topics for Group Research Project

After groups were assembled, students researched their assigned topic and crafted a 15-20 minute presentation on the debates surrounding it. Students were required to use five scholarly sources, craft a visual to aid in their presentation, and design a handout with useful information to distribute to their peers. As some of these are controversial issues, students were cautioned to be objective when presenting the material. The purpose of this presentation was not that of a persuasive speech where they would take a stance on the issue but an informative one where they would objectively (and evenly) relay the main points of both sides of the debate without reflecting bias toward one side or the other. Students were assessed on six areas: content (the interest-level and coverage of their assigned topic), research (the variety, balance, and academic quality of their sources), time (mastery of presentation time restrictions), visuals (design and utility of the presentation materials and handouts), organization (the overall structure of the talk and the extent to which the presentation seemed practiced), and delivery (the equal participation of group members and presentation skills among them).

Exams

Beyond the various assignments completed in and out of class, students were also assessed formally by a midterm and final exam. The midterm consisted of two parts: a quote identification section and a short answer section. For the former, students were given ten important quotations from the print and film texts we had studied to date and they were asked to list the title of the text, the name of the author/director, the name of the speaker/narrator, and the overall significance of the quote in relation to the work as a whole. For the latter section, students were given five prompts that asked them to respond to a work’s (or a set of works’) themes and/or social critique.

While the midterm aimed to assess students’ understandings of individual narratives (and their connections to one another), the final exam was focused more on the students’ understanding of the course concepts as a whole. This exam took the form of an in-class essay and asked students to respond to the prompt listed below:

**Prompt:** This course studied narratives that wrestle with ethical concerns surrounding “progress” (societal achievements, technological advancement, scientific discoveries, etc.). The authors and directors of the science fiction/dystopian texts we studied all wove the following questions into their works: what do we do when human survival and societal progress come at extreme costs, and how might such advancements cause us to question our faith in humanity? These authors and directors crafted fictional worlds that serve as cautionary tales for the reader/viewer. They each provided social commentary on various real world, contemporary issues by recreating them, exaggerating them, and situating them within fictional (and oftentimes, futuristic) worlds.

Select texts (based on the requirements below) that you feel well highlight our course theme. In your essay answer the following questions:

- What social commentary are the authors/directors making within each text?
- How well do they carry out these critiques?
- How might their mediated format, genre, and/or time of production influence your evaluation of the texts?

AND

- Are fictional texts a productive site for interrogating these concerns? (If so, why? And, if not, why not, especially when so many fictional texts strive to fulfill this goal?)

Fig. 1.5. Final Exam Essay Prompt

A student earned an “A” on this essay by creating an intriguing, thought provoking response which analyzed all of the required texts in meaningful ways; utilized specific examples to support the argument concerning the overarching theme; thoroughly covered all parts of the essay prompt, and flowed seamlessly, showcasing mastery of organizational devices, language, and proofreading.

**Conclusions: The Successes and Challenges in Teaching an Interdisciplinary Course**

Overall, the course succeeded in teaching social responsibility as students did begin to show concern about the well-being of various subgroups and the planet as a whole. As research predicted, the fictional
narratives were a productive space to engage with controversial topics, and by the end of the term students were able to easily locate the social commentary present within narratives and apply those critiques to the world around them. However, the promise within many scholars’ claims that such study would predispose students “to political action” and increase their “political interest and civic tolerance” was not always seen (Hinz and Ostry 8; Evans, Avery, and Pederson 297). While the course may ultimately impact students’ political consciousness, there was no way to determine with any accuracy if this will in fact occur. Class discussion and individual writing pieces indicate that students were able to objectively critique the society of which they are a part, but these critiques did not often extend into discussions of how to resolve such cultural problems. For example, while students were quick to agree with scholars who claim that their generation is overly dependent on technology – and students even shared their worries that such dependency could decrease their intellectual capabilities – they never suggested abandoning their favorite technological gadgets, social networking sites, and so forth. However, the fact that these students were able to “evaluate social institutions” and honestly discuss “problems and injustices” is a solid starting place for continued growth (Glasgow 54; Wolk 667).

The only surprising outcome of the course was the lack of group debate it inspired. As a course grounded in supposedly controversial issues, there was an overwhelming consensus on most of the topics. The students almost always agreed with the social commentaries provided by the authors and directors of the various texts and offered very little in terms of counter arguments. Since I have only taught this course once, I am unable to determine if this was the result of the classroom dynamic, the individual personalities within the class, or if the issues or texts themselves did not cater to divergent viewpoints.

And finally, in terms of the course’s cross-curricular focus: I was pleased that students were able to apply the motifs present within the fictional narratives to work being completed in other disciplines. Along the same lines, students were also able to study how these controversial topics were being discussed in other discourses and understand how that conversation – and the research being carried out in diverse fields – was being co-opted by the creators of fictional texts in productive ways.

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SECTION II:

THE BODY IN POPULAR DISCOURSE