

# Human, Mind, Machine: Artificial Intelligence from Antiquity to AI

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Office Hours: TBA

## Course Description



Artificial intelligence has taken discussions of the future by storm in contemporary discourse—but it might surprise you to learn that AI is nothing new. In fact, it has been around in various forms since Homer. From ancient times to the present, concepts of intelligence, consciousness, and the implications of replicating them have preoccupied poets, novelists, scientists, and philosophers alike.

In this course, we will explore the origins of the concepts of intelligence and consciousness in literature and philosophy, and how these become the basis for different visions of what “artificial intelligence”—forms of intelligence created by, and often external to, human beings—looks like. We will explore how texts and philosophies at different points in time envisioned such forms of intelligence and how they might shape the future and compare these projections to our own at the dawn of modern AI.

This isn’t just a course about robots: the biggest questions we will ask have to do with our understanding of what “intelligence” is, its evolving relationship to literature and art, and how it can be manipulated—a subject long central to literary texts. How is literary creation related to the human mind, and how is that relationship being refigured in light of AI? Why does the human impulse to create—the same impulse that compels us to produce literature—also give rise to a desire to recreate a version of our own brains and cognition in AI? We will explore how AI’s role in these questions gives rise to posthumanism, which wrestles in part with the prospect of a future in which humans are no longer the most intelligent entities.

You will have multiple opportunities to apply the concepts we discuss by engaging with AI software for two short writing assignments. We will discuss the results, how your experience using an AI software illuminates how this works and connect these workings back to the concepts of intelligence, its forms, and its manipulation. We will also be reading a novel created by an AI software and discussing its implications for authorship (Week 13).

By the end of the course, students will produce a 20-25-page paper on a topic of their choice.

**NB: This course focuses on a fast-moving topic not only in literature, but in technology and culture. Throughout the semester, I welcome students bringing in or recommending texts and media that have come to their attention on AI in the news or elsewhere. Please note also that the optional texts will not be covered in class and are intended to allow you to explore further individually, particularly as you think about your final papers.**

### Course Goals

- To gain familiarity with literary representations of intelligence and intelligent technology in major texts
- To become familiar with posthumanism, cybernetics, and critical discussions of authorship
- To learn how cultural negotiations of “intelligence” intersect with its literary representations
- To gain familiarity with AI software and their implications for literary production in the 21st century
- To improve clarity and vigor of writing and argument
- To be able to incorporate ongoing and fast-moving developments in culture and literature into literary critical writing

### Assignments

1. **Two mini-writing assignments (~200 words each), posted to Canvas by 5 pm the day before class.** Before class, you will be required to read your peers’ postings and come prepared to discuss:
  - i) **Chat GPT & Ovid:** Prompt ChatGPT to write a story that fits the parameters of Pygmalion. NB: When entering the prompt, use your own words to describe the story and what the software should produce. Write a 200-word post discussing the result and comparing it to the actual translation of Ovid that we read (for our purposes, the “original”). Include a formalist analysis. For this response, think about what, in your view, prompted ChatGPT to produce the version of Pygmalion that it did and what it has taught you about the way in which AI works. **Due in Week 3.**

- ii) **Conversation with an Author Bot:** Use SuperChat to have a 10-minute (minimum, longer if you wish) conversation with the AI bot version of a dead author. Make sure it is an author whose work you have read. Write a 200-word post discussing the result and, in your view, what it suggests about the relationship between technology, intelligence, and authorship. **Due in Week 6.**
2. **Short paper (5 pages)** that makes an argument based on a close reading of one of our literary texts from the first four weeks; designed to get you thinking about possible Junior Essay topics. **Due in Week 4.**
3. **Junior Essay (20-25 pages)** on a topic of your choice, due date TBA; in preparation for which, a **Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography**, **due in Week 9**; a **half-draft of the Junior Essay** **due in Week 10.**

### Grading Breakdown

Attendance & Participation (including film screenings, which are required and will be part of class discussion): 20%

Mini-writing assignments: 5%

Short paper: 15%

Prospectus & annotated bibliography: 5%

Junior essay half-draft: 10%

Junior essay final draft: 45%

### Course Policies

— Bring a paper copy of the week's theoretical texts, and something to write with, to every section.

— You will be permitted to use phones and laptops in class only for work or to access readings for the course. This is a technology-focused course, but please be cognizant and respectful in the way you use it and do so only for course-related reasons.

### Required Texts (other readings will be excerpted or posted to Canvas or linked here):

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

Karel Čapek, *R.U.R.*

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

Richard Condon, *The Manchurian Candidate*

Octavia Butler, *Dawn*

L. Frank Baum, *Tik-Tok of Oz*

Aidan Marchine, *Death of An Author*

## Schedule

### Week 1: Who is the Author in the Age of AI?

#### Primary texts:

Alan Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” (excerpts)

Jorge Luis Borges, “The Maker” and “The Library of Babel”

#### Secondary texts:

NPR *All Things Considered*: “[With AI, Artists Reckon With the Muddy Question of Authorship](#)” (April 2023)

Elizabeth A. Harris, “[Peering Into the Future of Novels, With Trained Machines Ready](#)” (NYT, April 2023)

Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author”

*Optional*: Daniel Grant, “[New US Copyright Rules Protect Only AI Art with ‘Human Authorship’](#)” (*The Art Newspaper*, May 2023)

### Week 2: What is Art in the Age of AI?

#### Primary texts:

Kyle Dargan, “The Robots Are Coming”

Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology”

Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

#### Secondary texts:

Bruce Clark and Manuela Rossini, “Literature, Posthumanism, and the Posthuman” (in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*)

### Week 3: Premodern AI, Miraculous Machines, and Dangerous Knowledge

#### Primary texts:

Homer, *Odyssey* (brief excerpts from Book 7: the thought-controlled Phaeacian ships)

Robert Greene, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*

#### Secondary texts:

Mark Dahlquist, "Love and Technological Iconoclasm in Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*"

Simon Schaffer, "Enlightened Automata" in *The Sciences in Enlightened Europe* (ed. Jan Golinski)

### Week 3: Human Agency and Our Quest to Recreate Ourselves

#### Primary texts:

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (Pygmalion episode)

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

#### Secondary texts:

Donna Haraway, *Cyborg Manifesto*

Mark Hansen, "Not Thus, after All, Would Life Be Given": "Technesis", Technology and the Parody of Romantic Poetics in "Frankenstein"

**\*\* CHAT GPT & OVID POSTING DUE BY 5 PM THE DAY BEFORE CLASS\*\***

*Optional:* Kevin Roose, "[Why a Conversation With Bing's Chatbot Left Me Deeply Unsettled](#)" (NYT)

### Week 4: Robots v. Humans: Our Fear of AI

#### Primary text:

Karel Čapek, *R.U.R.*

#### Secondary texts:

Kara Reilly, "From Automata to Automation: The Birth of the Robot in *R.U.R.*" (in *Automata and Mimesis on the Stage of Theatre History*)

*Film screening:* *Ex Machina*

**\*SHORT PAPER DUE BY MIDNIGHT\***

**Week 5: Cybernetics and Deep Learning—Can AI Reason?**

Primary texts:

Isaac Asimov, *I, Robot* (“Robbie”, “Little Lost Robot”)

Secondary texts:

Paul Pangaro, “Getting Started’ Guide to Cybernetics”

Video: “How AI Arose from Cybernetics”

Italo Calvino, “Cybernetics and Ghosts”

*Optional:* Salman Rushdie, “Could A.I. Write a Novel Like Hemingway?” (video)

**\*\* CONVERSATION WITH AN AUTHOR BOT POSTING DUE BY 5 PM THE DAY BEFORE CLASS\*\***

**Week 6: Library Visit**

No reading assigned for this week. Use the time to read ahead on the syllabus, especially if you think you might want to write your Junior Essay on a text we haven’t gotten to yet.

This week, we will be joined by Odile Harter, who will give a brief talk on the library’s resources for conducting research, which will be useful to you as you start to work on your Junior Essays.

After Odile’s talk, we will visit the Houghton Library, Harvard’s rare books and manuscripts repository, where we will view and handle rare items related to the course and your interests—maybe some of you will even decide that you want to write your Junior Essay on a rare item!

**Week 7: AI and the Malleable Boundaries of the Human**

Primary text:

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*

Secondary texts:

Ray Kurzweil, “The Mind As Computer” in *How to Create a Mind*

Yuqing Sun, “Post/Human Perfectibility and the Technological Other in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun*”

## Week 8: Manufactured Intelligence and the Government

### Primary text:

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

### Secondary texts:

Francis Fukuyama, "A Tale of Two Dystopias," in *Our Posthuman Future*

Josh Simons and Eli Frankel, "[Why Democracy Belongs in Artificial Intelligence](#)"

*Film screening: Blade Runner* (1982)

*Optional:* NYU Langone Health, "[New Artificial Intelligence Tool Makes Speedy Gene Editing Possible](#)"

## Week 9: AI, Justice, and Social Critique

### Primary text:

Octavia Butler, *Dawn*

### Secondary texts:

Lisa Dowdell, "Treasured Strangers: Race, Biopolitics, and the Human in Octavia E. Butler's *Xenogenesis* Trilogy" (*Science Fiction Studies*)

Joy Boulamwini, "[Artificial Intelligence Has a Problem With Gender and Racial Bias. Here's How to Solve It](#)" (TIME)

**\*\*PROSPECTUS AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE BY MIDNIGHT\*\***

## Week 10: Artificial Manipulations of Human Intelligence

### Primary text:

Richard Condon, *The Manchurian Candidate*

### Secondary texts:

Joan Didion, "California Notes," in *South and West*

Swan Kim, "The Color of Brainwashing: The Manchurian Candidate and the Cultural Logic of Cold War Paranoia"

**\*\*10-page partial draft of the junior essay due by midnight\*\***

## Week 11

No new readings on this day: instead, we will hold an in-class peer review essay workshop.

**\*\*DUE: 20-25-page full draft of the junior essay.\*\***

## Week 12: Do Robots Have Identities?

### Primary text

L. Frank Baum, *Tik-Tok of Oz*

### Secondary texts:

Abraham, Paul M., and Stuart Kenter. "Tik-Tok and the three laws of robotics." *Science Fiction Studies*.

Zoe Jaques, "The Child, the Book, and the Posthuman Ethic," in *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg*

*Film screening: Her* (2015)

## Week 13: AI and the Future of Authorship

### Primary text:

Aidan Marchine, *Death of An Author*

### Secondary texts:

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Manifesto and Foundation of Futurism*

Laura Miller, "[The Robot Did It](#)" (review of *Death of an Author* in *Slate*)