Tentative Syllabus
Comparative Literature 10, "Robots and AI in Fiction and Film"
Professor David LaGuardia, Spring, 2025

"…artificial humans were a cliché long before they arrived, so when they did, they seemed to some a disappointment. The imagination, fleeter than history, than technological advance, had already rehearsed this future in books, then films and TV dramas, as if human actors, walking with a certain glazed look, phony head movements, some stiffness in the lower back, could prepare us for life with our cousins from the future." Ian McEwan, *Machines Like Me* (New York: Doubleday, 2019), 1-2.

The invention of Chat GPT has reanimated a question that has been at the heart of a vast corpus of literary and cinematic works over the course of the last century: can machines think, and even become conscious of themselves as thinking, living beings? As early as Descartes's *Méditations métaphysiques* of 1641, the philosopher examines the relation of being to thought and consciousness, and equates his existence to thought in the famous dictum *cogito ergo sum*. "Je suis une chose qui pense," he writes, which in some ways is at the origins of science fiction plots in which robot protagonists declare, "I am a machine that thinks." This course will study a range of literary and cinematic plots and concepts derived from this fundamental philosophical notion. In the summer of 1956, a group of math professors and a researcher from IBM gathered at Dartmouth to focus on the possibility of making machines that would mimic the functioning of the human brain, coining the term "Artificial Intelligence": "… every aspect of learning or any other feature of intelligence can in principle be so precisely described that a machine can be made to simulate it. An attempt will be made to find out how to make machines use language, form abstractions and concepts, solve kinds of problems now reserved for humans, and improve themselves…" (Proposal for the *Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence*, August 31, 1955, p. 2.) Specialists on the subject have remarked that intelligence is only one among an indefinite number of "cognitive capacities churning away in the brain,"[1] among them consciousness, perception, cognition, understanding, emotion, desire, planning, thought, sense, sensibility, sensitivity, appreciation, evaluation, judgment, valorization, analysis, hypothesizing, feeling, intuition, the control of the body, etc. Almost all of these aspects of cognition have been analyzed in literary and cinematic productions since Karel Čapek's invention of the term "robot" in 1920. While speculative literature and cinema are not concerned with the technical aspects of how synthetic consciousness might be produced – Isaac Asimov, for example, simply invented the words "positronic brain" and "robotics" in the 1950s –, for the last century these kinds of works have dramatized the social, political, personal, and cultural consequences of the possible invention of this kind of technology in an indefinite future. This course will examine the wide range of stories in different formats and genres that have been produced about robots and AI during the last century, as a means of getting students to think about what literature as a mode of speculative thinking does for our perception of practical possibilities in future worlds.

COLT 10 is an introduction to the objects, methodologies, techniques, and approaches of Comparative Literature. What kinds of works do we study, using which tools and techniques? What constitutes a "work" in its diverse forms and genres? What do we hope to accomplish and to learn by engaging with texts of all kinds in their original contexts and languages? COLT 10 was originally intended to focus on "genre, periodization, theme, approaches to interpretation, intertextuality, literary tradition and innovation, national tradition and translation, and canon formation," at least according to the guidelines for the course adopted in 1989. "Robots and AI in Fiction and Film" will take a fresh look at these literary concepts from our

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[1] Justin Gregg, *If Nietzsche Were a Narwhal* (New York: Little Brown, 2022), p. 9

current perspective, considering the enormous influence of new technologies on literary, linguistic, and cinematic arts.

Learning objectives: students will learn to think about the attributes of the human mind and consciousness, and how they have been theorized in fiction and film. They will read a corpus of philosophical and theoretical texts about conscious being and its simulation by machines, as well as stories about automatons, androids, and robots ranging from fairy tales to science fiction, and examine the ideas of the uncanny valley, the Turing test, the affects, the relation of mind and body, mortality, the role of technology in human culture, the coming "singularity," etc.

Assignments: Using and critiquing ChatGPT, students will complete five assignments analyzing AI's utility in academic settings as a writing tool and discuss a range of problems and questions associated with developing "artificial" forms of thinking and consciousness. The possibility that these might eventually rival and even eclipse human intellectual activity is one of the oldest fears and phantasms that has been narrativized in the large corpus of stories, plays, television series, novels, and films that we will discuss in class. In these assignments, students will be asked to formulate a prompt for an AI program like ChatGPT (others will undoubtedly be developed by the time this class is offered) that addresses one of the core issues of our syllabus, for example "what would it mean for an artificial mind to be aware of itself, and how would we know?" They will then critique and revise the program's responses to these kinds of prompts and try to come up with answers that the program could not or did not envision. Students will also be asked to present their work to the class, and to comment upon the work of other students. The final project will be a close reading of a film, novel, or story that discusses how current versions of AI compare to the speculative ones represented in works of imaginative fiction.

Grading: final grades will be based upon the following criteria: class participation, 30%; four writing assignments, 30%; presentations, 20%; final project, 20%.

<div align="center">Schedule</div>

Weeks 1-2: introduction: Jennifer Robertson, *Robo Sapiens Japanicus*, chapter 1; Forerunners: Fritz Lang, *Metropolis*; *Pinocchio*; *The Nutcracker*; Freud, "The Uncanny"; Karel Čapek, *Rossum's Universal Robots*; Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Martin Scorsese, *Hugo Cabret*; Philip K. Dick, "Human Is," and Gotthard Günther, "The Soul of a Robot," from *Startling Stories* vol. 32 no. 3, Winter 1955. **Assignment 1.**

Week 3: What will robots do and be in the future? Isaac Azimov, *I, Robot*. Brian Aldiss, "Supertoys Last All Summer Long," Stephen Spielberg, *A.I., Artificial Intelligence*.

Week 4: Annihilate Humanity! James Cameron, *The Terminator*, *Terminator 2*; The Wachowski Brothers, *The Matrix*; *Westworld* (film and TV series, season 1) **Assignment 2**

Week 5: Becoming Human: *Bicentennial Man* (film), *Humans* (TV series), "Data's Day" from *Star Trek: the Next Generation*.

Week 6: the Mind/Body problem: Spike Jonze, *Her* (film); "San Junipero" from *Black Mirror* (TV series); *The Artifice Girl* (film) **Assignment 3**

Week 7: the Turing Test: Alex Garland, *Ex Machina* (film)

Week 8: Robot companions/servants, robots in love: Drake Doremus, *Zoe* (film, 2018); Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun* (novel); *Megan* (film, 2022) **Assignment 4**

Weeks 9-10: AI beyond/post/after humanity: Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Spike Jonze, *Her*; Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner*, *Ex Machina, The Matrix* **Final Assignment**

Bibliography of possible texts:

Books and articles:

Aldiss, Brian, "Super Toys Last All Summer Long," *Harper's Bazaar*, UK edition, December 1969.
Asimov, Isaac, *I, Robot* (New York: Del Rey, 2020; originally published 1950)
Čapek, Karel, *Rossum's Universal Robots* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928; originally published in Czech in 1920).
Descartes, René, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, tr. Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993; originally published 1641).
Dick, Philip K, "Human Is," *Startling Stories* vol. 32 no. 3 (Winter 1955), 67-74.
----------------, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (New York: Del Rey, 2017; originally published 1968).
Freud, Sigmund, "The Uncanny," tr. David McClintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003; originally published 1919).
Gregg, Justin, *If Nietzsche Were a Narwhal: What Animal Intelligence Reveals about Human Stupidity* (New York: Little Brown, 2022)
Günther, Gothard, "The Soul of a Robot," *Startling Stories* vol. 32 no. 3 (Winter 1955), 92-106.
Heidegger, Martin, "What is Called Thinking?" (excerpt), tr. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968; originally published 1954).
Ishiguro, Kazuo, *Klara and the Sun* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021).
Kant, Immanuel, *The Critique of Judgment* (excerpt), tr. J.H. Bernard (New York: Dover Publications, 2005 Originally published 1790).
Kurzweil, Ray, *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Penguin, 2005).
Lyotard, Jean-François, "Can Thought Go On Without a Body?", in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, tr. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).
McEwan, Ian, *Machines Like Me* (New York: Doubleday, 2019).
Plato, *Theatetus*, tr. Robin Waterfield (London: Penguin Books, 1987).
Robertson, Jennifer. *Robo Sapiens Japanicus : Robots, Gender, Family, and the Japanese Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).
Ryle, Gilbert, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Routledge, 2009; originally published 1949).
Spinoza, Baruch, "Of the Origin and Nature of the Emotions" (excerpt), in *Ethics*, trans. Matthew J. Kisner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018 Originally published 1675).

Films and Television Series:

Brackley, Jonathan, and Sam Vincent, *Humans*, season 1 (2015) (see also the original Swedish version *Real Humans* (2012) and the Chinese version (2021)).
Brooker, Charlie, *Black Mirror*, "Be Right Back" (2013) and "San Junipero" (2016)
Columbus, Chris, *The Bicentennial Man* (1999)

Crichton, Michael, *Westworld* (1973)
Cameron, James, *The Terminator* (1982) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991)
Garland, Alex, *Ex Machina* (2014)
Johnstone, Gerard, *Megan* (2022)
Jonze, Spike, *Her* (2013)
Lang, Fritz, *Metropolis* (1927)
Nolan, Jonathan and Lisa Joy, *Westworld*, season 1 (2016)
Ritch, Franklin, *The Artifice Girl* (2022)
Scott, Ridley, *Blade Runner* (1982)
Spielberg, Stephen, *A.I., Artificial Intelligence* (2001)
Roddenberry, Gene, *Star Trek* (the original series, 1966-1969); *Star Trek: the Next Generation* (1987-1994)
The Wachowski brothers, *The Matrix* (1999)

Student Accessibility and Accommodations. Students requesting disability-related accommodations and services for this course are required to register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS; Apply for Services webpage; student.accessibility.services@dartmouth.edu; 1-603-646-9900) and to request that an accommodation email be sent to me in advance of the need for an accommodation. Then, students should schedule a follow-up meeting with me to determine relevant details such as what role SAS or its Testing Center may play in accommodation implementation. This process works best for everyone when completed as early in the quarter as possible. If students have questions about whether they are eligible for accommodations or have concerns about the implementation of their accommodations, they should contact the SAS office. All inquiries and discussions will remain confidential.

Religious observances. Some students may wish to take part in religious observances that occur during this academic term. If you have a religious observance that conflicts with your participation in the course, please meet with me as soon as possible, or before the end of the second week of the term—at the latest, to discuss appropriate adjustments. Dartmouth has a deep commitment to support students' religious observances and diverse faith practices.

Mental Health and Wellness. The academic environment is challenging, our terms are intensive, and classes are not the only demanding part of your life. There are a number of resources available to you on campus to support your wellness, including: the Counseling Center which allows you to book triage appointments online, the Student Wellness Center which offers wellness check-ins, and your undergraduate dean. The student-led Dartmouth Student Mental Health Union and their peer support program may be helpful if you would like to speak to a trained fellow student support listener. If you need immediate assistance, please contact the counselor on-call at (603) 646-9442 at any time. Please make me aware of anything that will hinder your success in this course.

Title IX. At Dartmouth, we value integrity, responsibility, and respect for the rights and interests of others, all central to our Principles of Community. We are dedicated to establishing and maintaining a safe and inclusive campus where all have equal access to the educational and employment opportunities Dartmouth offers. We strive to promote an environment of sexual respect, safety, and well-being. In its policies and standards, Dartmouth demonstrates unequivocally that sexual assault, gender-based harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking are not tolerated in our community.

Honor Principle. The faculty, administration, and students of Dartmouth College acknowledge the responsibility to maintain and perpetuate the principle of academic honor, and recognize that any instance of academic dishonesty is considered a violation of the [Academic Honor Principle](#).