



ENGL 10426, Winter 2026
Monday/Wednesday, 4:30-5:50 PM
Cobb 409

Instructor: Chris Gortmaker, cgortmaker@uchicago.edu

Course Description

Was this written by a human? So what? As we enter the so-called “Age of AI,” we find ourselves asking questions like this, perhaps more than ever before. This course explores how works of fiction and film from the late nineteenth century to the present have engaged with and anticipated ideas about art, mindedness, emotion, and agency at the heart of contemporary debates about the cultural impact of generative AI. If generative AI poses a challenge to literature and art, what is this challenge? What are literature and art that AI-generated text and images are not? Moving from Edgar Allen Poe and modernist fiction to more recent sci-fi speculations about robots and mind uploading, we’ll analyze how literature has reflected on what sets its meaning apart from the products of machines, and what sets its artistry apart from mere algorithms and marketing. Readings in literary and critical theory will attune us to the relationship between abstract questions like “what is meaning?” and historical processes like capitalist automation—machines replacing human labor for profit.

Learning Goals

You should be able to get a few things out of this course. By the end, you will have a deeper understanding of 1. the literary and aesthetic implications of artificial intelligence, 2. the nature of intentionality and meaning, and 3. the relationship between capitalist automation and culture. You will learn or refine techniques for analyzing various forms of media, from narrative fiction and film to literary and critical theory. These skills will be valuable in other humanities courses and may help you become a more discerning culture consumer and political subject. Prior study of critical theory and experience with writing English papers will be helpful, but anyone who is committed to seriously engaging with the course material will do well.

Required Hardcopy Texts (note the ISBN; all other texts will be posted on Canvas as PDFs)

Phillip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, ISBN: 9780345404473

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, ISBN: 9780593318171

Henry James, *The Beast in the Jungle and Other Stories*, ISBN: 9780486275529

Matteo Pasquinelli, *The Eye of the Master*, ISBN: 9781788730068

Schedule of Readings

Week 1 - Ravens and Parrots

1/5 Monday

- Roald Dahl, “The Great Automatic Grammatizator” (1954)
- Ted Chiang, “Why AI Isn’t Going to Make Art” (2024)
- Edgar Allen Poe, “The Raven” (1845)

1/7 Wednesday

- Edgar Allen Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846)
- Emily Bender, et. al., “On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big? 🦜” (2021)
- **Commonplace Book Entry 1 due**

Week 2 - Wave Poems

1/12 Monday

- **Reading Response I Assigned**
- Matthew Kirschenbaum, “Again Theory: A Forum on Language, Meaning, and Intent in the Time of Stochastic Parrots” (2023)

- Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp, excerpts from “Against Theory” (1982)
- Four short positions papers from “Again Theory” forum: Seth Perlow, “Intention and Text Machines” (2023), Alex Gil, “On the Uses of Text beyond Intention” (2023), Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp, “Here Is a Wave Poem that I Wrote... I Hope You Like It!” (2023), Lisa Siraganian, “On Accidental and Parasitic Language” (2023)

1/14 Wednesday

- Jorge Luis Borges, “The Tower of Babel” (1941) and “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” (1939)
- **Commonplace Book Entry 2 due**

1/18 Sunday

- **Reading Response I due**

Week 3 - Capitalism, Algorithms, Machines

1/19 Monday - NO CLASS, MLK Day

- Brian Leiter and Jaime Edwards, excerpt from *Marx*, “Marx’s Economics and the Collapse of Capitalism” (2023)

1/21 Wednesday

- **Reading Response II Assigned**
- Matteo Pasquinelli, excerpts from *The Eye of the Master*, “Introduction”; Chapter 1: “The Material Tools of Algorithmic Thinking”; Chapter 3 “The Machinery Question”
- Optional supplementary readings: Henry Farrell, “Large AI Models are Cultural and Social Technologies” (2025); Yaqub Chaudhary and Jonnie Penn, “Beware the Intention Economy: Collection and Commodification of Intent via Large Language Models” (2024); Aaron Benanav, “Is the AI Bubble About to Burst?” (2025)
- **Commonplace Book Entry 3 due**

1/23 Friday

***Her* screening - Cobb 307 on Friday 1/23 from 7pm-9:30pm**

Week 4 - *Her* / Hegel

1/26 Monday

- Spike Jonze, *Her* (2013)
- Jensen Suther, “Hegel Against the Machines” (2023)
- Jensen Suther, excerpts from *True Materialism*, 1-15, 25-38, 74-83 (2025)

1/28 Wednesday

- Nicholas Brown, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption under Capital” (2012)
- Jennifer Egan, “Black Box” (2012)
- **Commonplace Book Entry 4 Due**

2/1 Sunday

- **Reading Response II due**

Week 5 - Mean Images, Market Ideologies

2/2 Monday

- **Midterm Essay Assigned**
- Hito Steyerl, “Mean Images”
- Walter Benn Michaels, “Formal Feelings”

2/4 Wednesday

- Matteo Pasquinelli, excerpts from *The Eye of the Master*, Chapter 7 “The Automation of Pattern Recognition” and Chapter 8 “Hayek and the Epistemology of Connectionism”
- **Commonplace Book Entry 5 Due**

Week 6 - The Beast

2/9 Monday

- Henry James, “The Beast in the Jungle” (1903)

***The Beast* screening - Date TBD - 7pm-9:30pm on Monday 2/9 or Tuesday 2/10**

2/11 Wednesday

- Bertrand Bonello, *The Beast* (2023)

2/15 Sunday

- **Midterm Essay due**

Week 7 - Dick

2/16 Monday

- Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968)

2/18 Wednesday

- Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*
- **Commonplace Book Entry 6 Due**

Week 8 - Dick / Ishiguro

2/23 Monday

- **Final Essay Assigned**
- Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

2/25 Wednesday

- Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, Parts 1 and 2
- **Commonplace Book Entry 7 Due**

Week 9 - Ishiguro

3/2 Monday

- Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, Part 3

3/4 Wednesday

- Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, Parts 4-6
- **Commonplace Book Entry 8 Due**

Date TBD

- **Final Essay Due**

Policies

Reading. Read and reread. Take notes; underline and circle words and phrases; mark important passages, writing them out by hand to understand them if necessary. Essentially, be an active reader. Your Commonplace Book will be essential here (more on this under “Assignments” below). Plan your time. Complete the reading before each session, give yourself time to think about the texts before class, and arrive with a few points and questions for discussion. Bring everything you have read thus far and all of your reading notes to class.

Attendance, deadlines. Any excuse for absence must be presented in writing before the next meeting of the class. Attendance at every class session is required; more than two unexcused absences will be grounds for failing the course. Assignment due dates are provided on the syllabus so that you can plan your work for the quarter. Extensions on writing assignments will be available but must be requested as far in advance as possible; failure to request an extension ahead of time may result in its denial. Late assignments will be docked half a letter grade each day they are late.

Academic honesty. I look forward to reading your work, which is to say, engaging with the ideas that you will write out to the best of your ability by drawing on what you have read and your own reasoning. Presenting ideas or phrases produced by other people or large language models as if they are your own is plagiarism. Thus, when you use the work of other people, cite it correctly. It is crucial that you are familiar with these standards, and it is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with them. If these standards are in any way unclear to you, please consult with me and/or your Writing Specialist. Academic dishonesty is a very serious offense, *even if it is unintentional*. Any form of academic dishonesty may result in immediate failure of this course and disciplinary action.

AI policy. The use of generative artificial intelligence (e.g., ChatGPT, Bard, Grammarly AI features, Phoenix AI, etc.) is prohibited on all writing assignments in the Media Aesthetics sequence. Why? Because we will be developing skills and knowledge that are important to discover and practice on your own. Because the use of AI tools inhibits development of these skills and knowledge, you are not allowed to use any AI tools in this course except as expressly directed to do so by me. Struggling to compose a clear and insightful phrase, sentence, or paragraph is how we learn to think critically through writing. Outsourcing this process to an algorithm short-circuits this process and often produces inane critical prose, wasting both your time and mine. Your thoughts matter, particularly if they are rough around the edges. Don’t use an algorithmic blender to make a thought-smoothie. That is not the point of this course. The point is to practice critical writing in all of its thrilling difficulty. If English is an additional language for you, you might consider the resources available at UChicago’s English Language Institute, <https://esl.uchicago.edu/>. If you are unclear if something is an AI tool, please check with me. Using AI tools for any unauthorized purposes in this course will violate the University’s academic integrity policy.

Accessibility and Student Disability Services (SDS). I am committed to doing whatever I can to make the course and its materials accessible. Students with disabilities who have been approved for the use of particular academic accommodations by SDS and need reasonable accommodation(s) to participate fully in this course should follow the procedures established by SDS. You can contact SDS by email (disabilities@uchicago.edu), by phone (773-702-6000), and via its website (disabilities.uchicago.edu).

Mental Health and Wellness. College life can be extremely stressful, and I recognize that the transition to college poses challenges for all students. Remember that you have in place a network of people who are ready and willing to help. Your College Advisor, your Resident Heads and Resident Assistants, and the staff at Student Counseling are available to you should you need or want to talk. You can find a description of services at wellness.uchicago.edu/mental-health..

Assignments and Evaluation

Essays. You will write two for this course. I will share prompts for these essays on Canvas well in advance of their submission deadlines.

Grade breakdown.

Attendance & Participation: 10%

Commonplace Book: 15%

Reading Response I: 10%

Reading Response II: 10%

Midterm Essay: 20%

Final Essay: 35%

Participation. This course is a seminar: we succeed or fail collectively. Arrive at each of our class sessions ready to talk and ready to listen. If a text excites you, talk about why. If something confuses you, ask questions. If you agree with comments someone makes, elaborate on your agreement for the class. If you disagree with someone, explain why. In short, contribute to our common intellectual enterprise. To explore questions and ideas you develop in your reading and in our class discussions, I encourage you to attend my office hours or email me to find other times. Even if your question or idea feels inchoate, don't hesitate to come by or get in touch. Similarly, if you feel that you're struggling to participate, for whatever reason, let me know. We will find ways for you to contribute. Let's think together.

Commonplace Book. You will create this dynamic book of quotations, annotations, questions, observations, diagrams, drawings, etc., over the course of the quarter. You must use a physical notebook and write by hand, unless you require other accommodations. Throughout the quarter, you must write at least *eight* entries in your commonplace book as a way to organize your thinking. Each entry must incorporate these four components:

- *Copy out* one substantial passage from the week's reading that is intriguing or confounding or related to broader questions/themes explored within the course. You'll be reading by hand, so to speak. This practice should train your attention on things like syntax, rhythm, diction. Focus on what resonates with your particular interests. Good choices will be moments in the text that you feel helpfully illuminate the larger argument or point, that raise questions for you on a first read and that you think you'd like to spend more time with, or ones that you simply find difficult, even confounding. Occasionally, you may also feel drawn to a passage that is beautiful or moving!
- *Annotate* this handwritten text, identifying important terms or themes, pulling out memorable turns of phrase or strategies of argument or description, commenting on the text through a process of explication and unpacking (the Latin root *explicare* means "to unfold"). Feel free to color-code, draw pictures/diagrams/lines, or use other creative annotations. I will also do my best to print out images so that you can mark them up. Get creative!
- Include one to two *interesting questions* you have about the material.
- In two to three bullet points, note your *observations* about the passage.
- Note the key term(s) of the reading and define it/them in your own words. E.g., "algorithm," "autonomy," "mean image," etc.

Each time you complete an entry, upload a fully readable photo of it to Canvas using the submission pages under the "Assignments" tab. It is up to you to upload eight entries by their respective deadlines throughout the quarter—no make-ups will be granted. The entries will help you write essays. They will also help you prepare for class discussion, and you should have your commonplace book ready at hand in class. Finally, and crucially, your commonplace book should not be the only form of notes you take for this class—it is meant to lend structure to your note-taking, which, in one form or another, should accompany any reading you do for this course. You might think of your commonplace book as the place you turn, beyond your usual notebook or notes document, when you are particularly struck by a passage and want to dig deeper. You might find yourself writing an entry several times a week, or you might just write the six that are required. Figure out what works best for you.

Essay Writing. All of the computer-based writing you do for credit in this course must be *directly performed* in the Google Doc found under the Collaborations tab in Canvas. This will primarily be essays and your preparation for them but may also include short assignments that you will complete in conjunction with your reading. You may *not* copy/paste external writing into your Google Doc. If you are found to have done so (via a combination of Process Feedback and Pangram) the writing in question will, by default, be considered generative AI-use and will not be evaluated for credit. If your writing exhibits clear evidence of generative AI-use such as a lack of recursive revision accompanied by flawless spelling and grammar and other "GPTisms," we will discuss this evidence in a meeting. On a case-by-case basis, evidence of generative AI-use may lead to an entire re-write, a grade penalty, or more serious consequences. In essence, localizing your writing within Google Docs and integrating Process Feedback is the best means I've yet found of ensuring that I am able to engage with your writing—your *thinking*—and not

that of a probabilistic machine. Google Docs + Process Feedback also facilitate dynamic and detailed forms of writerly collaboration and feedback.

Formatting. All essays should be formatted in 12-point, double-spaced Times New Roman font with a title and parenthetical or footnoted citations (no need for a bibliography). Citations are necessary for 1. quotation of any work, fictional or critical, and 2. paraphrase of a specific point an author makes in a critical work; if you're unsure whether to cite something you've paraphrased, do it. For the first citation of a source, include a footnote (e.g., author, title, page number). For subsequent citations, if the source is clear in the body text, a parenthetical page number suffices (e.g., 4); but if the source is not clear in the body text, include a footnote. Quotations that run over four lines of body text or include more than one paragraph should be formatted as block quotes: single spaced and indented with no quotation marks. Make sure to italicize book titles and place article and short story titles in quotation marks.

Submitting. To submit your assignment, email me before 11:59pm on the date that it is due, then make no further edits to your Google Doc. If you email me at 12:30am that next morning, that is OK. 4am is pushing it. Plan ahead and don't lose sleep. Any late changes to the assignment will be deleted because I will revert the document back to its original form at submission.