

Expository Writing 20: Is It O.K. To Be A Luddite?

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Robert McCall, *The Prologue and the Promise*, 1993. EPCOT Center, Orlando, Florida.

Course Description

“Is it o.k. to be a luddite?” This is the question that writer Thomas Pynchon asks us in a 1984 essay of the same name. “And come to think of it, what is a Luddite, anyway?”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that the word has at least two meanings:

1. A member of an organized band of English mechanics and their friends, who (1811–16) set themselves to destroy manufacturing machinery in the midlands and north of England.
2. One who opposes the introduction of new technology, esp. into a place of work.

As the second definition suggests but doesn’t outright say, “luddite” is typically an *uncomplimentary* term for someone who is suspicious of technology and, by extension, progress. This course will ask us to really consider the question Pynchon poses: is it okay to resist (or outright reject) technology? And what would it mean for us to do so? We will approach these questions (and many more!) from the perspective of cultural analysis, looking at how literature, film, and visual media reflect humanity’s ongoing relationship with—and struggles against—technology. We will read and write about world-altering technologies that are difficult to ignore, but we will also explore the quotidian, the utopian, the obsolete, and the downright absurd—from Google Earth and cloud seeding to VHS tapes and alchemical monsters—all the while looking for ways to understand technologies through the stories we tell about them.

Course Objectives

Above all, this course is intended to develop your skills, confidence, and passion as a writer. Through each of the three course units, we will look at academic, non-fictional, and creative writing both rigorously and critically. We will pay close attention to the arguments and styles encountered in the readings and use them as positive and (in some cases) negative examples for our own work. Our discussion in class and online will foster our understanding of what it means to delineate and defend a debatable claim within the humanities, and we will complement these broader aims with attention to essay organization and writing style. With the help of brief writing assignments, in-class presentations and workshops, and one-on-one instructor conferences, this course will cultivate your creativity and empower you as a persuasive, engaging, and lucid writer.

One of the central goals of this course is to familiarize you with three central kinds of essays you will be asked to write in your time at Harvard (and beyond): analysis, lens, and research. However, these are not only modes of academic expression, they are also modes of thinking. You should leave this class with new and exciting methods of reading and thinking about literature, film, theory, advertising, and the objects around you.

Unit Descriptions & Major Assignments

Unit 1 will approach questions and problems of technology through the mediums of film and essay. We will read Thomas Pynchon's "Is It O.K. To Be A Luddite?" and explore key questions underpinning an age-old tension between the "two cultures": (techno)science and the humanities. Throughout the course we will question this divide, reading thinkers and writers from a range of disciplines and backgrounds who attempt to reconcile this rift. We will analyze visual media like painting, photography, and film to help us articulate the tensions—if, indeed, they exist—between art and science & technology and humanity. Screenings will include (dependent on availability) two films directed by Stanley Kubrick—*2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964).

Paper 1: Close Reading/Analysis

For Paper 1, you will closely read and engage with a single film, developing an argument not only about what it says but also about how it says it. This essay will build a foundation for Papers 2 & 3, and it will also give you the opportunity to perform a kind of scientific dissection. Just as you might dissect a frog in a biology class, for Expos 20 you will dissect writing and images.

In **Unit 2**, we will organize our reading and thinking around Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818). Readings will include analyses of Shelley's novel from a range of perspectives (e.g. historical, feminist, Marxist). We will then turn to secondary texts in philosophy, sociology, and more that will serve as lenses for your second paper. These may include (subject to change!) articles and book excerpts from the following thinkers: Bruno Latour; Elaine Scarry; Charles Perrow; Martin Heidegger; and Ruha Benjamin.

Paper 2: Lens

For your second essay, you will bring two sources into conversation. You will use one text to develop a reading of evidence from another source—a process that will lead, in turn, to a *new argument* about the parallels, divergences, or relationships between them.

The course's **final unit** will be built around student research and the interests and questions that you bring to the class. We will put to use the skills and ways of thinking developed in Units 1 & 2 to combine close analysis of individual artworks and explication and engagement with the ideas of other writers. Together we will read short fiction from Slate's and Arizona State University's [Future Tense project](#) and view film and television about technological futures (e.g. *Geostorm*, *Black Mirror*, *Futurama*, *The X-Files*). For Paper 3, you will select a primary "text"—although this could be visual media, fiction, poetry, or something further afield (think: Google Earth)—and conduct independent, interdisciplinary research about the cultural object you have chosen.

Paper 3: Multi-Source Research

For Paper 3, you will have a great deal of freedom to select a topic that excites, troubles, or challenges you. You will select a technology or idea—explored or expressed in a text, image, film, or other object—related to the course's themes, conduct research on your chosen topic, and develop an argument based on what you find.

Planned Readings & Viewings

Required Text:

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Annotated for Scientists, Engineers, and Creators of All Kinds* (The MIT Press, ISBN 9780262340267) ****Make sure you get this edition**, available [on Amazon](#), as a free [PDF through Hollis](#), and soon at The Coop.**

Available through Canvas and TBD:

2001: A Space Odyssey (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1968)

Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1964)

Frankenstein (dir. James Whale, 1931)

+ Selected television episodes, short fiction, and articles/essays