

Alternative Futures: Introduction to Literary and Cultural Analysis

ENGL 1260W.06, Spring 2017

TR 8:10am-9:25am | Furman Hall 330

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 4-5pm or by appointment

The twenty-first century has so far intensified the sense that the world as we know it is ending. Contemporary fictions have reflected this reckoning. This course explores the alternate futures – both near and far – imagined by writers, filmmakers, and theorists in works that reflect the gravity and absurdity of what is to come. Many of our course texts show that humans have played a significant role in making today’s world and are often responsible for its problems: for example, climate change and gross inequality. Indeed, the course readings raise political and ethical questions about who will be protected from and who will be made vulnerable to catastrophe. Further, we will attend to how futures may be experienced and figured differently, in ways mundane and spectacular, concrete and abstract. By analyzing and discussing these varying representational strategies, this course will equip its students with the writing and critical reading skills necessary to convey their experience in their academic and professional futures. The works assigned include Paul Beatty’s *The Sellout*, Basma Abdel Aziz’s *The Quene*, Tom McCarthy’s *Satin Island*, and the television show *Black Mirror*. Students will write three papers, compose frequent reading responses, and be asked to work in groups to analyze what fictional futures tell us about our present.

Required Texts

Paul Beatty, *The Sellout* (Picador, 2016) ISBN: 978-1250083258

Basma Abdel Aziz, *The Quene* (Melville House, 2016) ISBN: 978-1612195162

Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island* (Vintage, 2016) ISBN: 978-0307739629

Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (Anchor, 2004) ISBN: 978-0385721677

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (Grand Central, 2000) ISBN: 978-0446675505

These books are available for purchase at the Vanderbilt Bookstore. You can also buy these books elsewhere, but make sure you’re buying the editions listed above.

All other course readings will be posted on our course website. Unless instructed otherwise, print out a hard copy of assigned electronic readings to bring to class.

REQUIREMENTS AND ASSIGNMENTS

Grade Distribution

Participation	15%
Group Presentation	15%
Responses	20%
Papers 1 and 2	30%
Revision/Expansion Paper	20%

Group Presentation

In a group of two or three, you will conduct an in-class conversation about the day's assigned reading and how the reading engages contemporary concerns, as well as current events. The conversation will last 10-15 minutes. The presentation will lead into a class conversation about the text and the events or issues it raises for your group. As such, your presentation must provide well-researched context for our discussion. Practically, this means you will need to research the text you discuss, its writer, and the events/issues that you see intersecting with the text.

The night before the presentation your group will submit to me via email the following things: a short (3-4 sentences) statement of what your presentation will be about, a list of no less than four questions that you will discuss with each other, one discussion question that you will ask the class at the conclusion of your presentation, a list of the major passages of texts you will discuss, and a brief description of how you divided the labor of the presentation. I have included some examples of what this document should look like on Blackboard.

This assignment is designed to get you talking, researching, and thinking about the relevance of what we do in the classroom to the world outside of it. Doing so requires you to interact with members of our community and not just consider these questions in isolation. You will be graded on the rigor of your conversation, your group's pre-presentation document, and the ability of your conversation to provoke a wider class discussion.

Papers 1 and 2

You will write and submit two papers of approximately five pages in length that assert and support an academic argument about assigned course texts. All papers will ask you to analyze one or two course texts in relation to the themes of the course. For the first paper assignment, I will provide prompts, but for the second paper assignment you will be responsible for developing your own topic. More details about paper assignments will be distributed as their deadlines approach. For now, know that you will be graded on your ability to develop a coherent argument that is related to course texts and topics. By coherent argument, I mean that your major claims are well supported with textual evidence and that your writing is easily understood.

Revision and Expansion Paper

Your final paper for the course will build on the work done in either the first or second paper assignment. You will submit a revised and expanded paper of approximately seven pages at the end of this course. Your revision will account for comments provided by the instructor, as well as the critiques of your peers during in-class workshop. It will also further develop the initial argument by adding discussion of another course text and/or bolstering your claims by engaging with scholarly research. We will discuss the parameters of this assignment after you submit your second paper. My hope is that this paper will reflect your areas of interest and expertise, which means that I will check in with you throughout the semester about ideas for your paper.

Responses

You will write seven responses of 250-500 words over the course of the semester. You can turn in your responses at any time in the semester, but you can never submit more than one response per class period. There are fourteen weeks in the semester so you should be turning in a response every other week. You *must* turn in three responses by Spring Break. Your responses should be turned in at the end of class in hard copy. I will grade responses on a check, check plus, check minus scale. I

will not accept revisions to responses, unless they are radically altered. I will, however, accept more than seven responses, in which case I will take your seven highest grades.

Your responses should engage with the texts we are reading for a particular class either on its own or in conversation with other works that we have read. You should always be referencing particular passages of texts in your responses and should cite those references parenthetically in the text.

Responses are a great place to pursue questions that you might want to discuss with your classmates, to develop a close reading for a paper, or to make more sense of a difficult passage. In other words, responses are an opportunity to work on grounding your thinking in what you've read and to consider how that thinking connects to larger issues that are of interest to you. For the first six weeks of the course, I will provide a few questions that you may wish to consider in your responses, though you are welcome to write on whatever you'd like. My questions will provide a model for the types of questions you will learn to ask of literature and culture.

Participation

This is a discussion-based course, so come class prepared to be an active member of the discussion. To be an active member of discussion, you'll need to come to class with a firm grasp of the assigned readings, questions you have about the material, and respect for the comments and questions of your classmates.

Conferences

You are required to meet with me one-on-one once this semester to discuss the course or your writing. I strongly encourage you, however, to meet with me more often. Drop in during my office hours or, make an appointment with me. Don't stand me up, especially when you make an appointment outside of office hours – doing so counts as an absence. Also, if you happen to be one of my advisees, please do not use the CASPAR scheduler to make an appointment with me to discuss our course.

POLICIES

Attendance

Come to every class on time with the assigned readings and note-taking materials. More than two unexcused absences will adversely affect your overall course grade. Arriving late or not bringing your text to class will also count against you. If you know you will be absent in advance for a university sanctioned reason, contact me ahead of time.

Deadlines

All assignments must be turned in by announced deadlines. If this does not seem possible for a particular assignment, you should contact me well in advance so we can come up with a solution.

Screens

I ask that you not use computers, tablets, cell phones, or any other electronic devices during class. Since you won't be using these items, they should be put away during class time. You will be notified of occasional exceptions to this policy.

Email

Email is the best way to schedule an appointment with me or to ask me questions about the course material. Sometimes – especially near paper deadlines – it may take me more than 24 hours to get back to you, so plan accordingly. I prefer you to use professional email etiquette, meaning that you use salutations, punctuation, and complete sentences. An emoji every now and again won't hurt anyone, though.

The Writing Studio

Your writing will benefit from a visit to the Writing Studio. Writing Studio consultants can help you with all aspects of academic writing at any stage of the writing process. I know, because I take my writing there. Make an appointment at one of their two locations – in 1801 Edgehill or the Ingram Commons – by using their online scheduler. (vanderbilt.edu/writing)

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a serious transgression and, as such, cases of plagiarism will be handed over to the Honor Council. That said, plagiarism can be difficult to define. Be rigorous about citing any sources you consult while working on assignments for this class. If you have questions about what is and isn't plagiarism, please don't hesitate to ask me. For more about academic integrity at Vanderbilt visit vanderbilt.edu/academicintegrity.

Schedule

Week 1

T, 1/10: Introductions
R, 1/12: Anna Tsing, "Some Problems with Scale" [online]; Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia" [online]

Government and Administration

Week 2

T, 1/17: Paul Beatty, *The Sellout* (pp.1-109)
R, 1/19: *The Sellout* (110-150)

Week 3

T, 1/24: *The Sellout* (151-250)
R, 1/26: *The Sellout* (251-end)

Week 4

T, 1/31: Basma Abdel Aziz, *The Queue* (pp. 1-71); [Interview with Basma Abdel Aziz](#)
R, 2/2: *The Queue* (72-100)

Week 5

T, 2/7: *The Queue* (101-174)
R, 2/9: *The Queue* (175 –end); Writing Workshop

Work and Life of Capitalism

Week 6
T, 2/14: Jonathan Crary, *24/7* (excerpt) [online]; “Nosedive,” *Black Mirror* (S3, E1)
R, 2/16: **PAPER 1 DUE**

Week 7
T, 2/21: Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island* (pp. 1-67)
R, 2/23: *Satin Island* (68-98)

Week 8
T, 2/28: *Satin Island* (99-153)
R, 3/2: *Satin Island* (154-end); **Three Responses Due**

Spring Break

Security, Displacement, and the Biopolitical

Week 9
T, 3/14: Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (pp. 1-110); Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus* (excerpt) [online]
R, 3/16: *Oryx and Crake* (111-144)

Week 10
Film Screening: *Children of Men* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2006)
T, 3/21: *Oryx and Crake* (145-261)
R, 3/23: Writing Workshop; *Oryx and Crake* (262-282)

Week 11
T, 3/28: *Oryx and Crake* (283-332)
R, 3/30: **PAPER 2 DUE**; *Oryx and Crake* (333-end)

Week 12
T, 4/4: Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (pp. 1-85)
R, 4/6: *Parable of the Sower* (86-115)

Week 13
T, 4/11: *Parable of the Sower* (116-195)
R, 4/13: *Parable of the Sower* (196-224)

Week 14
T, 4/18: *Parable of the Sower* (225-293)
R, 4/20: *Parable of the Sower* (294-end); Writing Workshop

Revision/Expansion Paper due via Blackboard on April 27 at noon.