

## PAPER #2 - ASSIGNMENT

### Critical Essay

Your assignment is to write a critical essay about one or more “texts” – films, books or articles – that bear on the role of digital media and/or information technology in society. On the attached page I list several options for texts to analyze (or you can propose something else).

A good essay will incorporate answers to questions like these:

- What sort of argument is the filmmaker or author making (explicitly or implicitly) about technology or media? Do you find it valid and convincing?
- Is the present or future society depicted in the “text” realistic or likely to exist? Is it an appealing version of social reality or social change? Should it be?

The point here is not to act merely as a “reviewer” (e.g., a film reviewer who comments on the experience of seeing a film and its aesthetic or cinematic qualities). Instead, your role is that of a *cultural critic* who tries to understand the social, political, economic, or literary meanings that are created and/or critiqued in the text. What kind of reality or competing realities are being depicted? What is the nature of the criticism going on in this film or book? Is it powerful or effective? What makes it so? What does it miss? Where does it fall flat?

This essay does not require outside research beyond the “text” itself (film/book/article), although it may be helpful to do a bit of looking into what its creator had in mind or had to say about it (e.g., by seeking out archival interviews with the writer or director). It is certainly appropriate and desirable to draw upon concepts developed in course readings and discussed in the seminar. As always, you should cite sources appropriately when you refer to or draw upon them (with footnotes using the *Chicago Manual of Style*, as mentioned in the syllabus).

#### Some Particulars:

- Length: ~1500 words for the text itself (excluding footnotes or appendices)
- Format: Follow instructions on page 3 of the course syllabus.
- Dates: - Topics deadline (choice of “text”) due Friday, February 9 at 4:00 pm.  
- First draft due Friday, February 23 at 4:00 pm.  
- Final version due Friday, March 16 at 4:00 pm.
- Grade weight: 25% of course grade.

#### Approval of Text:

You are required to obtain my approval for your choice of “text” no later than Friday, February 9. Please obtain that approval by sending me an email message. If you are going to analyze something from my list, approval is automatic, but I still need to hear from you as to what you will write about. If you are proposing something not on my list, please identify the text(s) and explain in a paragraph why you think it is suitable for this course and assignment. Although February 9 is the approval deadline, you are welcome (encouraged, in fact) to seek approval earlier than that; I will reply promptly.

#### Ongoing Advice:

Have yet another look at the section of the course syllabus (p. 4) titled “*Criteria for Evaluating Written Work in this Course.*” See also the evaluation form for this assignment, a copy of which is attached here.

## Possible "Texts"

Here is my list of texts you can write about. Choose one or two for your essay. You may also propose something not on my list, as described on the preceding page.

### Films (films shown in **bold** are especially recommended)

- **Thank You for Smoking** (director Jason Reitman, 2005)
- Control Room (director Jehane Noujaim, 2004)
- **Shattered Glass** (director Billy Ray, 2003)
- Minority Report (director Steven Spielberg, 2002)
- Time Machine (director Simon Wells, 2002)
- Startup.com (docu.) (directors Chris Hegedus/Jehane Noujaim, 2001)
- **Artificial Intelligence: A.I.** (director Steven Spielberg, 2001)
- The Insider (director Michael Mann, 1997)
- **The Truman Show** (director Peter Weir, 1998)
- Pleasantville (director Gary Ross, 1998)
- **Gattaca** (director Andrew Niccol, 1997)
- **Wag the Dog** (director Barry Levinson, 1997)
- Fifth Element (director Luc Besson, 1997)
- The War Room (docu.) (director Chris Hegedus/D.A. Pennebaker, 1993)
- Talk Radio (director Oliver Stone, 1988)
- Brazil (director Terry Gilliam, 1985)
- Absence of Malice (director Sydney Pollack, 1981)
- Being There (director Hal Ashby, 1979)
- **Network** (director Sidney Lumet, 1976)
- Medium Cool (director Haskell Wexler, 1969)
- Meet John Doe (director Frank Capra, 1941)

(find information on each film at the Internet Movie Database: <http://www.imdb.com/>)

### Books

- White Noise (Don DeLillo, 1986)
- Being There (Jerzy Kosinsky, 1970)
- 1984 (George Orwell, 1949)
- Brave New World (Aldous Huxley, 1946)

### Article

- Why the Future Doesn't Need Us (by Bill Joy, *Wired*, April 2000)  
<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.04/joy.html>