

Course Syllabus

FSEM 1111: Utopia, Distopia, and the End of the World

Course Description

'Utopia' is often defined as an imaginary ideal civilization. In '*Utopia*' Sir Thomas More writes of an island enjoying a perfect economic, social, legal, and political system. Sounds great. Yet to call someone a 'utopian' today is generally regarded as a perjorative comment. The very ideas of 'Utopia' and 'Utopians' are maligned in literature, film, and political discourse. From Darwin to Malthus to Adam Smith to contemporary films like 'The Matrix' and Al Gore's 'An Inconvenient Truth' – the nature of the human condition remains contested, and human progress is in no way guaranteed. This course explores ideas of 'Utopia', 'Distopia', and 'The End of the World' in literature and film. Questions to be answered by the students will be: "*What is the best of all possible worlds?*", and, "*What, if anything, will I do to create them?*" We will explore these questions by reading literature on ideas of utopia and watching and discussing several movies that mock ideas of utopia from various angles: (overpopulation, bio-disaster, nuclear disaster, ecological collapse, totalitarian political nightmare, etc.). Students will write three short papers associated with these ideas and learn to digitally edit a feature film and present their 45 minute synopsis to the class.

Books

Utopia by St. Thomas More
(Finish reading this by end of week #2)
Candide by Voltaire
(Finish reading this by end of week #3)
Ecotopia by Ernest Callenbach
(Finish reading this by end of week #7)

Movies

Soylent Green Lost Horizon
The Corporation Koyannisqatsi
The Handmaid's tale Special Bulletin

Grading

Class Participation (including generating discussion questions for the movies we watch)	20%
1 st Paper: Utopia & Utopians (1-2 pgs) (Due on Tue September 21 th – 2 nd Week)	15%
2 nd Paper: Types of Distopia & respective likelihoods (5-8 pgs – write & rewrite) (Draft/Outline due on Tue Oct 5 th - 4 th Week, final paper due on Tue Oct 19 th – 6 th Week)	20%
3 rd Paper: What future do you want? What future do you expect? (7-10 pgs) (Due on Tue Nov 9 th – 9 th Week)	20%
Digital Editing of a feature film to 45 minutes w/ presentation (Hand me a flash drive with an avi file on it on Thursday Oct 14 th – 5 th Week)	25%

Important Note: All assignments can only be turned in during or immediately before or after class. Late assignments will be penalized one letter grade for each class period they are late. For example, if you turn in your 3rd Paper on Thursday Nov 11th and it is a 'B' paper – you will receive a 'C' on it.

Help With Writing Papers: I encourage you to take advantage of the Writing and Research Center's services; writers from all skill levels benefit from feedback. The Center offers one-on-one consultations that address everything from brainstorming and developing ideas to crafting strong sentences and documenting sources. For more information, call 303-871-7431 or stop by the Penrose Library Monday-Thursday 9 am - 6 pm and Fridays 10 am - 3 pm.

Tentative Schedule of Topics

Week 0: Dialogs and Destinations

Interspersed with the natural and necessary protocols of the “Dialogs and Destinations” Orientation activities I will introduce the course. This will involve a hike to ‘Devil’s Head’, followed by a movie and a dinner at my house. The movie will be: Frank Capra’s **Lost Horizon** (1937). The dinner discussion will focus on the idea of ‘Utopia’ in both a general sense and from ideas presented in the movie. We will also play a parlour game based on suggestions as to what movies and books we should read in the class. As we return to DU all students will be given their first reading assignment: Thomas More’s ‘Utopia’. This reading will be the most ‘stilted’ academic’ text they will be assigned but begged to bear with it because of its seminal nature.

Week 1: Protocols, 1st Writing Assignment, and a Movie

Day #1: Hand out syllabus. Assign First Paper (15% of course grade): A one to two page paper defining Utopia and Utopians. Discuss this assignment. We will have a free ranging discussion on ideas of Utopia including ideas presented in Capra’s movie: *Lost Horizon*. Discussion of what we may have read in More’s *Utopia* – it’s style and its conclusions. A Question to ponder: Is Utopia about economic arrangements, and legal enforcement of those arrangements in a meritocracy? (Star Trek might come up as an example...). Introduce and motivate our next movie: “*Soylent Green*”.

Movie Day #2 (**Soylent Green**): Watch the movie “*Soylent Green*”. Briefly introduce movie as an element of ‘cultural literacy’, motivate need to strip movies like this down to salient points for instructional purposes (and later movie-editing assignment), note the ‘objectification of women’ in this movie (women are referred to as ‘furniture’) link ideas to another movie involving the objectifications of women: ‘*The Handmaid’s Tale*’.

Week 2: Discuss First Writing Assignment; Assign Second, and another movie.

Day #1: Collect Week #1’s writing assignment. Discuss student’s ideas as developed in their first paper. Discuss “*Soylent Green*”. Discuss the general ideas of distopia that will manifest in the movies we will watch throughout the course (e.g. overpopulation (*Soylent Green*), corporate usurpation of government (*The Corporation*), religious intolerance (*The Handmaid’s tale*), etc.). Assign 2nd reading: Voltaire’s *Candide* (students have one week to read this short work). Assign 2nd paper: ‘*Characterize the types of distopia presented in movies, literature, and popular discourse. Assess their respective probabilities. Present an appropriate human response to these threats.*’ (Note: 1st Draft is 5% of your grade (Due Week #4), Final Draft is 15% (Due Week #7). Discuss Thomas More’s: *Utopia*. The instructor will give a mini-lecture on the life and times of Sir and Saint Thomas More. Introduce and motivate our next movie: “*The Corporation*”.

Movie Day #2 (**The Corporation**): Watch the movie “*The Corporation*”. Discuss the role of corporations and multi-national corporations in global governance today. Discuss the BP oil spill and political reaction to it. Discuss the WTO and its role in global governance. Posit the question: What is a stronger authority the WTO or the United Nations? Why? The film is an award winning documentary that takes a scathing look at the entity we call the corporation and compares its behavior to a socio-path. Assess student’s feelings about the relative correctness of the ideas of 1) Corporate Utopia, and 2) Corporate Distopia.

Week 3: Matriarchy vs. Patriarchy, Matriarchy as a Utopian ideal, and a movie.

Day #1: Assign second reading: Voltaire's *Candide* (done reading by next week). Discuss Riane Eisler's book *The Chalice and the Blade*. How were the matriarchies presented in the book different from society today? Were they utopias? Were they viable? Continue discussions on various types of dystopia presented in various movies relevant to 2nd writing assignment.

Movie Day #2 (**The Handmaid's Tale**): A religion and under-population dystopia involving offensive subjugation of women. Discuss parallels to recent dystopia movie: 'Children of Men'. Contrast with overpopulation in "Soylent Green"

Week 4: Student Feedback on potential dystopias and their likelihoods and a movie.

Day #1: Collect 2nd writing assignment. Engage students in discussion of what they wrote about in this first draft: What are common dystopia themes and which ones strike you as likely? Have a discussion contrasting Thomas More's ideas of Utopia with Riane Eisler's. Raise the question: Is Thomas More's Utopia a serious blue-print for a real place based on Plato's *Republic* or is it a satire? Assign 3rd reading: Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*. Introduce and motivate next day's movie.

Movie Day #2 (**Special Bulletin**): This film is a 'war of the worlds-like' movie that freaked out a lot of people back in the late 1980's that is about a nuclear terrorist incident in South Carolina. Makes a mockery of the media and does not provide a happy ending. Key point about this movie is the ending. The bomb **does** go off. Not like in 24. No happy ending. Raises interesting questions about the *likelihood* of various dystopia scenarios. Raises interesting questions about the inevitability of human progress.

Week 5: Psychological Takes on Utopia, 3rd Reading assignment, and another movie.

Day #1: Return graded 1st drafts of student papers. Discuss competing ideas of Utopia: Economic Meritocracy on a geographically protected island (Thomas More's idea), Matriarchy (Riane Eisler's), Psychological (Candide's 'Best of all possible worlds. '), and 'Off the grid, ecologically sustainable, survivalist communities' (Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*). . Introduce and motivate the movie: *Brazil*.

Movie Day #2 (**Brazil**): Reality in the movie *Brazil* is an Orwellian governmental bureaucracy failing to manage a chaos of terrorism in an urban dystopia. The friends and associates of the protagonist are all blissfully in denial of this reality as the protagonist becomes aware of it and fights the evil government with the Robert de Niro character. Protagonist also has a rich fantasy life. Different endings to movie will be explored in light of discussion of *Candide* reading.

Week 6: Contrasting ideas that present Utopia as a naïve fantasy

Day #1: Collect Rewrite of Assignment #2. An instructor led Socratic lecture to initiate a discussion centered about four great and influential books: The Bible, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, Thomas Robert Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population*, and Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Summary of the main ideas in these books

followed by question led discussion as to how they pertain to ideas of and potential for utopia and or distopia. Instructor will lead a discussion contrasting ideas of cultural and biological evolution and teleological ideas that many people ascribe to them. Assign final paper asking students to paint a picture of their idea of Utopia, assess how realistic their ideal world is, describe what they think the near future will really look like, and explain how they hope to live in it.

Day #2: Student Video Presentations

Week 7: Perfect Capitalism as Utopia? And another movie

Day #1: Student Video Presentations and if time allows an instructor led discussion on Market Failures such as Monopoly, Common Property, Public Goods, and Externalities. These are serious criticisms of pure capitalism that have relevance to many ideas as to the cause of various representations of distopia. Have a discussion about ideally eliminating market failures as a means of achieving a capitalist utopia. Discuss the ideas of Utopia as manifested by the community of Ecotopia. What problems materialized for this real world attempt to create a Utopia. What were the motivations of the people of Ecotopia to try to create this community? Are they relevant today? Discuss the movie: The Corporation. Discuss how Ecotopia is a community built in opposition to corporate impacts on humanity.

Movie Day #2: Student Video Presentations

Week 8: Ecocide and Ecological Collapse and another movie

Day #1: Student Video Presentations and if time allows an instructor led discussion of various hypothesized threats of ecological collapse ranging from ideas in Jared Diamond's book 'Collapse: How societies choose to either succeed or fail' to Al Gore's movie 'An Inconvenient Truth'. Threats to be discussed will include climate change, frankenfoods (Genetically Modified Organisms), loss of biodiversity, loss of soil and water, deforestation, etc. Explain how difficult it was to find a ecological collapse distopia movie.

Day #2 Student Video Presentations

Week 9: The Chop Shop: Presentation of edited movie synopses by students

Day #1 & #2: More Student Video Presentations

Week 10: Students immediate and long term plans and prospects, Course evaluation

Day #1: Open discussion focused on the ideas students have about the utopia they might like to see or create. Find out what students realistic ideas of the future are. Are they optimistic or pessimistic? Do a little career exploration with them – what are they majoring in at DU and what do they plan to do with their degrees? Watch Zeitgeist if there is any interest.

Day #2 (No Movie Week 10): Wrap up the course. Conduct formal and informal evaluations of the course with the students. What worked? What didn't work? Were the readings too long? Did we watch too many movies? Were the writing assignments fun?