

Being Artificial

LIT 290S

Duke University

Spring 2021

Tu/Th 1:45–3:00 EST

David Rambo, PhD

Synopsis

“Being Artificial” interrogates the ethical and existential binaries associated with technological creation such as natural/artificial, actual/virtual, original/copy, authentic/inauthentic, intentional/unintentional, habit/deliberation, and reality/fiction. Through science-fiction literature, film, and video games, students will explore how technological artifice contributes to existing social divisions rooted in ideologies pertaining to sex, gender, race, age, class, and bodily capacity. The chosen texts explore how developments in computation and synthetic biology during the last two decades ground new reflections in art on social and ontological hierarchies of originality and artificiality. Dennis Villeneuve’s recent *Blade Runner* sequel, for instance, moves beyond the first film’s existential questions and depicts replicants as a minority class of persons, another wage-laborer among the working class. Yet, the film also undermines this solidarity by basing the replicants’ political autonomy in the reproductive capacity of a female replicant. Various conceptualizations of “womanhood” recur in these narratives: from the homophobic normativity that confronts the queer cyberpunk protagonists in Melissa Scott’s *Trouble and Her Friends*, to the reproductive labor performed by women either as or in conjunction with artificial beings like those in Ted Chiang’s “The Lifecycle of Software Objects,” Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina*, and Katie Williams’s *Tell the Machine Goodnight*.

Technological artifice includes much more than robots, clones, and AI. It can be found at the root of culture: from the social roles we perform and conceptual systems by which we interpret the world to the media that record, transmit, and modify those roles and systems. The question, “What does it mean to be artificial?,” is close to another: “Who—or what—is the human?”

Assignments

Students will engage in frequent and varied writing assignments throughout the course, with an emphasis on working through the material by writing and revisiting their writing.

Students will write a total of six 300-word expository posts on the course website. They will have the option to respond to another student’s post for credit if their response involves an original contribution to the discussion. The online posts provide a repository of ideas and

questions for seminar discussions, which directs students to consider their writing from the perspective of its potential audience. This component of the course work as well as the peer review process will help cultivate in students a naive eye—that is, an ability to view their writing as if for the first time and thus without the assumptions that their audience likely will not have.

Two 1,000-word essays, which will be peer reviewed. Students will be able to revise their two shorter essays for a new grade.

A 2,500-word essay, which will begin with a 500-word prospectus outlining the anticipated argument and sources. The prospectus will be peer reviewed. All essay assignments will receive instructor feedback, and the two shorter essays will be open to revision for a new grade.

Grading

Seminar discussion: 20% Six online posts: 20% altogether Two shorter essays: 30% (15% each)
Final essay and prospectus: 30%

Course Materials

Books

Please obtain a copy of the following novels:

- Marge Piercy, *He, She and It* (1993)
- Melissa Scott, *Trouble and Her Friends* (1994)
- Peter Watts, *Blindsight* (2006)
- Katie Williams, *Tell the Machine Goodnight* (2018)

The following texts will be provided electronically, but you are welcome to purchase the hard copy:

- N. K. Jemisin, from *How Long 'Til Black Future Month?* (2019)
 - “The Trojan Girl” (2011): <http://nkjemisin.com/2012/08/the-trojan-girl/>
 - “Walking Awake” (2014): <https://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/fiction/walking-awake/>
 - “The Ones Who Stand and Fight” (2020):
<https://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/fiction/the-ones-who-stay-and-fight/>
- Ted Chiang, “The Lifecycle of Software Objects” (2010/2019)
 - included in *Exhalation: stories* (2019), which is available online through library.duke.edu
- Chiang, “Liking What You See: A Documentary”
 - in *Story of Your Life and Others* (2002), I’m working on finding a PDF.

- William Gibson, “The Winter Market” (1981), pp.124–150 in *Burning Chrome*, pdf on Sakai

Films

- Alex Garland, *Ex Machina* (2014)
 - DVD in Duke library and streamable through library.duke.edu
- Dennis Villeneuve, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)
 - DVD in Duke library
- “Striking Vipers” episode of *Black Mirror* S05E01 (2019)
 - on Netflix

Games

These may be played on a variety of platforms and purchased for computer on distribution storefronts such as humblebundle.com, itch.io, and Steam. For a price aggregator, see cheapshark.com.

- *Her Story* (2015)
- *Eliza* (2019)

Schedule

Week 1

Thursday, January 21

- Isaac Asimov, “First Law” (1956), pp.186–188 in *The Complete Robot*, pdf on Sakai
- Isaac Asimov, “Segregationist” (1967), pdf on Sakai

Week 2

Tuesday, January 26

- William Gibson, “The Winter Market” (1981), pp.124–150 in *Burning Chrome*, pdf on Sakai

Thursday, January 28

- Dennis Villeneuve, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)

Week 3

Tuesday, February 2

- Marge Piercy, *He, She and It* (1993)
 - through p.157

Thursday, February 4

- Marge Piercy, *He, She and It*
 - through p.275

Week 4

Tuesday, February 9

Paper 1 Assigned

- Marge Piercy, *He, She and It* (finish)

Thursday, February 11

- Garland, *Ex Machina* (2014)

Week 5

Tuesday, February 16

- *Eliza* (Zachtronics 2019)

Thursday, February 18

Paper 1 Workshop

Week 6

Tuesday, February 23

Paper 1 Due

- Katie Williams, *Tell the Machine Goodnight* (2018)

Thursday, February 25

- Katie Williams, *Tell the Machine Goodnight* (2018)

Week 7

Tuesday, March 2

- Ted Chiang, “The Lifecycle of Software Objects”

Thursday, March 4

- Ted Chiang, “The Lifecycle of Software Objects”

Week 8

Tuesday, March 9

Spring Break — No Class

Thursday, March 11

- *Her Story* (2015)

Week 9

Tuesday, March 16

Paper 2 Assigned

- Chiang, “Liking What You See: a documentary,” in *Stories of your life and others* (2002), pp.281–323.

Thursday, March 18

- Chiang, continued.
- Lorna Roth, “Making Skin Visible,” in *Captivating Technology* (ed. by Ruha Benjamin), pp.276–307.
- Ruha Benjamin, “Innovating Inequity: If Race Is a Technology, Postracialism Is the Genius Bar,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* Vol. 39, No. 13 (2016): pp.2227–2234.

Week 10

Tuesday, March 23

- “Striking Vipers” (season 5, episode 1 of *Black Mirror*)

Thursday, March 25

Paper 2 Workshop

Week 11

Tuesday, March 30

Paper 2 Due

- Melissa Scott, *Trouble and Her Friends* (1994)

Thursday, April 1

- Melissa Scott, *Trouble and Her Friends* (1994)

Week 12

Tuesday, April 6

- N. K. Jemisin, “The Trojan Girl”
- Jemisin, “Walking Awake” (2014)

Thursday, April 8

- Peter Watts, *Blindsight* (2006)

Week 13

Tuesday, April 13

- Peter Watts, *Blindsight* (2006)

Thursday, April 15

Prospectus for Final Project Due. We will workshop these today.

Week 14

Tuesday, April 20

- Jemisin, “The Ones who stay and fight” (2020):
<https://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/fiction/the-ones-who-stay-and-fight/>
- Sylvia Wynter, “On the Why of Subjective Experience, the Artificial and Relative Nature fo Being Human...” (pp.45–54) from “Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity,

the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be ‘Black’,” in *National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America*, edited by Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana (Routledge 2001): pp.30–66.

Thursday, April 22

Conclusion and discussion of final projects.

Final paper due Saturday, May 1 at 10 PM

(Our final exam period is May 1, 7 – 10 PM)