Influencing Machines: Technology and the Paranoid Imagination

At the height of the industrial revolution in England, an inmate at Bedlam asylum named James Tilly Matthews told his physicians that he was being persecuted by an “air loom,” a pneumatic machine that emitted magnetic mind-control rays and projected hallucinatory images. Matthews’s case offers the first known instance of what psychoanalyst Victor Tausk later called the “influencing machine,” a fantastical device that soon traveled from medical case studies to literature and art, and ultimately became a persistent motif of 20th century science fiction and cinema. Tracing the psychiatric and cultural history of the influencing machine, this course explores how the paranoid imagination, in its complex transit between the clinic and the novel, has shaped collective ideas about technology. The following questions will guide our inquiry: How has madness influenced cultural responses to technology, and vice versa? What does the literature of influencing machines reveal about the relations between paranoia and technological progress? Why and how has the paranoid imagination registered so acutely – and sometimes even anticipated – key innovations in modern technology? The course will begin with the earliest representations of paranoia and technology, and conclude by interrogating the centrality of paranoid suspicion in the contemporary digitally networked age.

This is primarily a literature course, but it has a broadly interdisciplinary scope: readings will include medical case studies and texts concerning the history of psychiatry. We will also view works of visual art and films that resonate with course readings, as well as investigate some varieties of paranoia found on the internet.

Objectives
This intensive reading and writing course aims to help students develop reading and writing skills essential to college-level work. Classes will emphasize discussion, collaborative learning, and open-ended exploration of texts and ideas. Students will work on the mechanics of writing analytical essays and research papers, including structuring arguments, using textual evidence, and working with secondary sources. Additionally, the final research project will introduce students to independent research techniques and skills. The strategies of close reading, textual analysis, and argumentation developed in the course will have relevance to many areas of study.

Required Texts
Adolfo Bioy Casares, The Invention of Morel
Philip K. Dick, The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch
Rivka Galchen, Atmospheric Disturbances
Barbara O’Brien, *Operators and Things*  
Daniel Paul Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*  
Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*  
Evelyn Waugh, *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*

Additional readings will be distributed as handouts, and/or via the course website and NYU Classes (we will use an NYU Wordpress site in addition to Classes).

**Requirements**  
*You are required to attend and arrive punctually to all class sessions.  
*This is a reading-intensive course (we will read between 60 and 150 pages a week). You are expected to complete all readings and come to class ready to discuss them.  
*You will write 1-page ungraded short responses when no major assignment is due.  
*You will be asked to contribute to regular discussions on the course website.  
*You will write three short (3-4 pg.) essays and one longer (6-8 pg.) research paper.  
*You will be asked to make one 5-10 minute presentation on an assigned reading.  
All written assignments must be typed, double-spaced in 12-point font with 1"-1.25" margins on all sides, and formatted according to MLA standards. Unexplained late submissions of graded assignments may result in a 10% markdown per day late, so please be in touch if you will have any difficulty submitting an essay on time.

**Grading**  
The three shorter essay assignments will be worth 15% each.  
The final research paper will be worth 30% of the grade.  
The presentation will be worth 10% of the grade.  
The ungraded (credit/no credit) response papers will be worth 5% of the grade.  
The remaining 10% will be based on class participation and related contributions.

**Conferences**  
In addition to office hours (TBA) held every few weeks, you will have opportunities to meet with me to discuss an essay in progress. A conference is required during the early weeks of working on the Final Research Paper; conferences will also be available during the week prior to submission of both Essay 1 and Essay 2.

**Classroom Policies**  
The classroom is a shared space where we focus on the challenging work of the course. For the sake of maintaining a productive learning environment, please:  
*Silence and put away all portable electronic devices when you enter the classroom.  
*Do not use laptops or tablets for purposes other than class-related work.  
*Do not consume food or drink in class in ways that will distract your classmates. Discreet snacks are ok if consumed quietly, as are drinks in covered containers, but please do not, for example, eat an entire meal in the midst of a class session.
Plagiarism
The MLA Style Manual defines plagiarism as "[u]sing another person’s ideas or expressions in your writing without acknowledging the source . . . [T]o plagiarize is to give the impression that you wrote or thought something that you in fact borrowed from someone . . . Forms of plagiarism include the failure to give appropriate acknowledgment when repeating another's wording or particularly apt phrase, paraphrasing another's argument, and presenting another's line of thinking." If you are using someone else’s ideas or language in a piece of writing, you must cite your source in the correct manner, following MLA documentation rules. It does not matter whether the other person is a published author, a fellow student, or an anonymous author on a website: if you present his or her words as your own, you are plagiarizing. Plagiarism may result in a zero on the assignment, receiving a failing grade or being dropped from the class, and disciplinary action by NYU.

Writing Center
The Writing Center is a vital resource for student writers, which will give you the opportunity to gain another perspective on your essays in progress, and to work closely with a tutor on an essay you are developing. Visiting the Writing Center during the essay-writing process is strongly recommended. For information on making an appointment with a consultant, visit http://nyu.mywconline.com/

Additional Resources
The Moses Center provides accommodation and support for students with disabilities. For more information, Google “NYU Moses Center,” email mosescsd@nyu.edu, or call 212-998-4980 or 646-997-3451 (Tandon office).

The NYU Wellness Exchange is “your key to accessing the University’s extensive health and mental health resources.” By contacting the Wellness Exchange, you can find help with issues including illness, academic stress, depression, anxiety, and many more. 212-443-9999 is a 24-hour hotline. Email: wellness.exchange@nyu.edu.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments
Below is an outline of reading and writing assignments for the course. Assignments are due in class on the day they appear in the schedule. You will receive additional detailed instructions for each major assignment. Keep posted for possible changes in this schedule. All major submission dates are boldfaced and underlined.

Abbreviations: H=handout; O=online.

Week 1 (Jan. 26)
Read: Jay, “How Reality Caught up with Paranoid Delusions” (H/O); McPhate, “United States of Paranoia: They See Gangs of Stalkers”

**Week 2** (Feb. 2)
Read: Jay, “Illustrations of Madness: James Tilly Matthews and the Air Loom” (O); Brückner, “Animal Magnetism, Psychiatry, and Subjective Experience…” (); Hoffmann, “The Sandman” (H); Maupassant, “The Horla” (H)
Write: Response paper 1

**Week 3** (Feb. 9)
Read: Schreber, *Memoirs of my Nervous Illness* 3-140; Dinnage’s introduction
View: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*
Write: Response paper 2

**Week 4** (Feb. 16)
Read: Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* 141-259; Roberts, “Wired: Schreber as Machine, Technophobe, and Virtualist” (O); Santner, *My Own Private Germany* (O)
Submit Essay 1

**Week 5** (Feb. 23)
Write: Response paper 3

**Week 6** (Mar. 2)
Read: Waugh, *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* 1-150; Kittler, *Discourse Networks* (H)
View: *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*
Write: Response paper 4

**Week 7** (Mar. 9)
Read: Waugh, *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* 151-223; Sachs, “The Delay of the Machine Age” (O)
Write: Response paper 5

NO CLASS Mar. 16 (Spring Break)

**Week 8** (Mar. 23)
Read: Dick, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*
View: *North By Northwest*
Submit Essay 2

**Week 9** (Mar. 30)
Read: O’Brien, *Operators and Things* 7-113; Laing, from *The Divided Self*
Write: Response paper 6

**Week 10** (Apr. 6)
Read: O'Brien, *Operators and Things* 115-197; Deleuze/Guattari, from *Anti-Oedipus*
Write: Response paper 7

**Week 11** (Apr. 13)
Read: Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*; McKenna, “A Kiss of Cosmic Pool Balls” (O)
View: *Videodrome*
Submit Essay 3

**Week 12** (Apr. 20)
Read: Galchen, *Atmospheric Disturbances* 3-125 Gold, from *Suspicious Minds* (H)
Write: Response paper 8

**Week 13** (Apr. 27)
Read: Galchen, *Atmospheric Disturbances* 126-240; Gold, from *Suspicious Minds* (H)
Write: Response paper 9

**Week 14** (May 4)
Submit Final Research Paper