ENG 4139: “Television & Electronic Culture: The End – Informational Millenarianism & the Y2K Crisis”

Professor Terry Harpold
Fall 2005
Tu, 1:55–2:45 PM (period 7)
Th, 1:55–3:50 PM (periods 7–8)
Screenings: M, 7:20–10:10 PM (periods E1–E3) – see course calendar for screening dates

Turlington 2322

office hours (Turlington 4361): Tu, 3–5 PM, & by appt.
voice: (352) 392-6650 x282
email: <tharpold@english.ufl.edu>
home page for Terry Harpold:
<http://www.english.ufl.edu/~tharpold>
home page for ENG 4139:
<http://www.english.ufl.edu/~tharpold/courses/fall05/eng4139>

Course description

Rome was burning.

The fire suppression system in the Sistine Chapel thought it had been turned off for maintenance. The note the firebomber taped to the Holy Door in St. Peter’s Basilica said he was the Son of Kaczynski. None of this, his brief manifesto said – citing the shootings of looters in police-crippled Mexico City, the train collision in Berne, the Israeli-Palestinian bloodbath in Jerusalem – none of this would have happened if the Church had not set up a web page on the Internet. But the Church, he said, had aligned itself with the anti-Christ, the Internet. It must all be swept away.

– Andrew Burt, Noontide Night (1999)

The innovation of the ship already entailed the innovation of the shipwreck. The invention of the steam engine, the locomotive, also entailed the invention of derailment, the rail disaster… Each period of technical evolution, with its set of instruments and machines, involves the appearance of specific accidents, revealing in negative the growth of scientific thought.


Nearly six years after the Big (non)Event, Andrew Burt’s novel of the Y2K crisis appears overwrought and badly dated, destined, with other Jeremiads of the year zero – militia and urbanite survivalist manuals, New Age celebrations of off-the-grid living, corporate preparedness checksheets – for the remainder table and the library discards bin. The nearly complete disappearance of Y2K stories from the popular press in the West suggests that public consciousness has moved on. One is tempted to ascribe the panic to a momentary distraction in the ongoing triumph of computing culture.

This course begins with a contrary proposition: crisis and failure are constitutive elements of technological systems and as such are irreducibly present as the horizon of every technological imaginary – and its corollary: even the most optimistic futurities of informational culture are bounded by fantasies of “endism,” predicated on the possibility of massive, systemic chaos and collapse. Interpreted in this context, Y2K’s entanglements of (religious) millenarian fantasies, a second-time-only moment of the Gregorian calendar, and the effects of an absurdly short-sighted technique of data storage and recovery, seem more exemplary of than exceptions from the occult structure of the emerging informational society.
Our readings in this course will range widely, and will include nonfiction texts in the history of millennialist thought, philosophy and critical theory, systems risk theory, and media studies. We will also read several novels of Y2K panic and view films and excerpts from films on the theme of the panic or technological crisis and endism in general.

Course requirements include a take-home midterm, an annotated research bibliography, and a final research paper.

**Required texts**

These texts are available for purchase at Goerings Book Store, 1717 NW 1st Avenue (voice: 377-3703).


These texts are held on electronic reserve at UF’s George A. Smathers Libraries <http://eres.uflib.ufl.edu/> or are available online from other sources.


Other short texts may be distributed in class or placed on electronic reserve at UF’s George A. Smathers Libraries.

**Required film screenings**

We will view six films during the semester; all are required viewing for the course. Films will be screened on Monday evenings, 7:20–10:10 PM (periods E1–E3), in Turlington Hall 2322. *Films will not be screened every Monday evening; you should check the course calendar for screening dates, as they are distributed irregularly throughout the semester.*


**Attendance, assignments, & grading**

**Attendance & lateness**

The texts we will read are complex, subtle, and challenging. You cannot reasonably expect to master them if you do not keep up with all required reading assignments and come to class prepared and on time. Moreover, our discussions in class will often include review of materials not included in the assigned readings. For these reasons, your presence in class is essential and is required. After three absences, I reserve the right to lower your final course grade by five points for each additional class that you miss.

I treat excused and unexcused absences alike in this regard. It is your responsibility to keep track of your absences and to make sure that you complete all required work for the course. If you must miss class, make sure that you turn in any assignments due for that day, and that you are ready if another assignment is due on the day you return to class. In the event of a prolonged illness or other emergency, you should notify me as soon as possible, so that we may make provisions to insure that you do not fall behind.

Lateness is disruptive to others in the classroom, and is strongly discouraged. If you are more than 15 minutes late to class, this will be considered an absence.

If you have special classroom access, seating, or other needs, please do not hesitate to bring those to my attention, so that I may make appropriate accommodations for them.

If you are unable to attend any part of a class meeting, or work on a course assignment because these coincide with the timing of religious observances, you must notify me of this conflict well in advance, so that we may make appropriate adjustments to relevant assignment deadlines.

**The film screenings are required viewing.** Several of these films are out of print or are difficult to obtain; you are unlikely to find them at your local video rental store; your best opportunity to see them is at the Monday night screenings. No attendance will be taken at the screenings. I will, however, give short in-class quizzes on the films at the beginning of the next class meeting after each screening. If you have not seen the film, you will be unlikely to do well on the quiz. No make-up quizzes will be given. I will count toward your final grade the average of your best five of the six quizzes given.
The use of computers and other electronic devices in class

Students in this course may use laptop computers and other portable electronic devices in class for the purposes of taking notes during class discussion or for in-class presentations. WWW browsing, emailing, chatting, etc., unrelated to class activities is, however, inappropriate and will not be tolerated. In the event of a violation of this policy, I reserve the right to prohibit the use of all electronic devices in class by individual students and/or the class as a whole. Cell phones, pagers, and other communication devices may not be used during class meetings, and must be turned off at the start of class.

Assignments & grading

Your final grade will be determined by the average of four assignments:

- In-class quizzes on films (average of best 5 of 6) 10%
- Take-home midterm 30%
- Annotated research bibliography 15%
- Research paper (10–12 pages) 45%

Grades are calculated on a numerical scale, as below:

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If you feel that you’ve been unfairly graded on an assignment, you may make a case in writing for a better grade. I will consider no grade changes without this written rationale.

You may turn in a written assignment late without penalty only if you have a written medical excuse from a doctor, a signed letter from a judge or law enforcement officer (if you are called for jury duty or to testify in court, for example), or if a death or serious injury occurs in your family. In each of the cases, I will expect you to notify me of the reason(s) for your absence(s) in a timely manner, and may ask you for written documentation of them.

Format, topics, & due dates of assignments

The take-home midterm and the research paper must be submitted on paper, have been composed with a computer or word processor, and must follow guidelines on format and citation methods that I will distribute in class. You must submit two copies of every print assignment. I will keep one copy, and return the other to you, marked with my comments and corrections.
The **take-home midterm** is open-book and will require that you respond to two of three short essay questions. It will be distributed at the end of class on October 13, and will be due at the beginning of class on October 18.

You may not collaborate with any other person when working on this exam. Because it is intended to be a time-limited review of your understanding of course readings and discussions, the penalty for an exam returned after the deadline is severe: for each day that your completed exam is late, ten points will be deducted from the grade for that exam. I will not accept any exam that is turned in later than three days after its due date, in which case a grade of 0 will be given for the exam.

The **annotated research bibliography** is an exercise in collaborative research on subjects related to the concerns of the course. To complete this assignment, you must identify a short list of print and electronic scholarly sources related to the Y2K crisis, technological crisis, or informational millennialism relevant to the projected topic of your research paper. You will be required to document these sources carefully, and to write a short abstract of each with sufficient detail and discernment that others will find these abstracts useful for their research. You will transmit electronic copies of your bibliography to me (in a format and a method that I will specify) for review and grading. This assignment is due November 17.

I will collate the bibliographies produced by students in the class and redistribute them to the class in the form of a single document that may serve as a valuable resource in your research for the final paper.

The **research paper** (10–12 pages) may be on any subject relevant to the concerns of the course, but must reflect the research project implicit in your annotated research bibliography. It is due at the beginning of the final class meeting, December 6.

Penalties for research bibliographies or research papers turned in after their respective deadlines are significant: for each day that one of these assignments is late, five points will be deducted from the grade for that assignment.

**There are no other graded assignments in this course. I do not give “make-up” or “extra-credit” assignments. There is no final exam in this course.**

**Policy on academic honesty**

The University community’s policies and methods regarding academic honesty are clearly spelled out in the Academic Honesty Guidelines. The Guidelines are printed in full in the current Undergraduate Catalog, and are available online from the Office of Student Judicial Affairs home page of the Dean of Students Office WWW site, at <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/judicial/>.
Academic dishonesty in any form will not be tolerated in this course. Examples of academic dishonesty include but are not limited to:

- Possessing, using, or exchanging improperly acquired written or oral information in the preparation of graded assignments submitted for this course.
- Substitution of material that is wholly or substantially identical to that created or published by another individual or individuals.
- False claims of performance or work submitted by a student for requirements of this course.

I am obliged to act on any suspected act of academic misconduct. This may include a reduced or failing grade for the course as a whole or other disciplinary proceedings, as per the recommendation of the Dean of Students. If you have any concern that you may not have made appropriate use of the work of others in your research or writing for this course, please confer with me before you submit the assignment. You should retain all graded materials that you receive from me until you receive your final course grade.

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Course calendar

Aug 25 (Th)  Course introduction

TEOTWAWKI

Aug 30 (Tu)  Bennett & Dodd, “Executive Summary”
U.S. Senate Special Committee on the Year 2000 Technology Problem, Y2K Aftermath – Crisis Averted: Final Committee Report

Sept 1 (Th)  Manion & Evan, “The Y2K Problem”
Schanzer, “The Impending Computer Crisis of the Year 2000”
(Virilio, “The Accident Museum”

Sept 6 (Tu)  Gould, Questioning the Millennium

Sept 8 (Th)  Gould, Questioning the Millennium
Strozier, “Introduction” (Strozier & Flynn, 1–12)
Sept 12 (M)  **Film screening:** Lowry, dir., Y2K: The Movie

Sept 13 (Tu)  Class discussion of Y2K: The Movie  *(No assigned reading)*


**Crisis temporality**

Sept 20 (Tu)  Schwartz, “Economics of the Millennium” *(Strozier & Flynn, 309–24)*

Sept 22 (Th)  Baudrillard, “Hysteresis of the Millennium” *(Strozier & Flynn, 250–63)*

Sept 26 (M)  **Film screening:** Bigelow, dir., Strange Days

Sept 27 (Tu)  Class discussion of Strange Days  *(No assigned reading)*

Sept 29 (Th)  Philip & Harpold, “‘Party Over, Oops, Out of Time’: Y2K, Technological ‘Risk’ and Informational Millenarianism”

Oct 4 (Tu)  Blanchot, The Writing of the Disaster

Oct 6 (Th)  Blanchot, The Writing of the Disaster

“It’s built even better than we thought…”

Oct 10 (M)  **Film screening:** Sargent, dir., Colossus: The Forbin Project

Oct 11 (Tu)  Class discussion of Colossus: The Forbin Project  *(No assigned reading)*

Oct 13 (Th)  Clarke, “Dial F for Frankenstein”
Clarke, “The Nine Billion Names of God”
**Take-home midterm distributed**
“In one hour is thy judgment come…”

Oct 18 (Tu)  
**Take-home midterm due (No assigned reading)**

Oct 20 (Th)  
The Revelation of Saint John the Divine, chs. 16–21 (King James Version)  
Diamond, “Political Millennialism within the Evangelical Subculture” (Strozier & Flynn, 206–16)  
Jeffrey & Hunt, *Flee the Darkness*

Oct 25 (Tu)  
Jeffrey & Hunt, *Flee the Darkness*

Oct 27 (Th)  
Burt, *Noontide Night: A Y2K Novel*

Nov 1 (Tu)  
Gibson, “Is the Apocalypse Coming? Paramilitary Culture after the Cold War” (Strozier & Flynn, 180–89)  
Tiggre, *Y2K: The Millennium Bug*

Nov 3 (Th)  
Tiggre, *Y2K: The Millennium Bug*

**The excentric kernel**

Nov 7 (M)  
**Film screening:** Marcarelli, dir., *The Omega Code*

Nov 8 (Tu)  
Class discussion of *The Omega Code* (No assigned reading)

Nov 10 (Th)  
Cowan, “Confronting the Failed Failure: Y2K and Evangelical Eschatology in Light of the Passed Millennium”

Nov 14 (M)  
**Film screening:** Wachowski & Wachowski, dirs., *The Matrix*

Nov 15 (Tu)  
Class discussion of *The Matrix* (No assigned reading)
Nov 17 (Th)  Ellison, “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream”
Ellison, “‘Repent, Harlequin!’ Said the Ticktockman”
**Annotated research bibliography due**

Nov 21 (M)  **Film screening:** Godard, dir., *Alphaville*

Nov 22 (Tu)  Class discussion of *Alphaville* *(No assigned reading)*
**Collated bibliographies returned**

Nov 24 (Th)  **No class meeting (Thanksgiving holiday)**

**Postscript**

Nov 29 (Tu)  Ballard, “A Guide to Virtual Death”
Ballard, “Report from An Obscure Planet”

Dec 1 (Th)  Joy, “Why the Future Doesn’t Need Us”

Dec 6 (Tu)  **Course review (No assigned reading)**
**Final class meeting**
**Research paper due**