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ENGL 112B

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Technology's Role in the Descent to and ascent from Dystopia

Rational

As technology continues to advance at an ever-increasing rate, the possibilities of what can be done exponentially be they for better or ill. As is, technology has found its way into every part of modern life. Of course, many of these advancements improved society immensely by increasing access to information, lengthening life expectancy, and perhaps most importantly, easy means of communication. However, technological advancement also provides repressive governments and bad actors new avenues of control. False narrative can be spread almost instantly, and access to information that would contradict it can be restricted; the combination of surveillance technology and social media means that privacy is all but nonexistent. Fortunately, technological advancement is something of a double edged sword. The same technologies that can be used as tools of oppression can also be used by the oppressed as tools of organization and resistance.

Dystopian fiction offers students a chance to see these situations that they likely wouldn't have experienced otherwise. It allows for possible futures where the problems are much more obvious, and the solutions are much less grey.

This unit relies on a pairing of *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury and *The Matrix* by Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski as key examples of dystopian fiction that

highlight both the positive and negative elements of tech. *Fahrenheit 451* provides an example of tech as exclusively negative. *On* the other hand, the Matrix offers a scenario where tech is still oppressive but can be used against itself. The goal of this unit is for students to be able to recognize the elements of dystopian fiction and be able to see those fictional elements in the real world.

Introduction to the unit

First Days

At the beginning of the unit, students will watch the start of *The Matrix*, until just after the famous “red pill blue pill” scene. After watching the clip, students will be asked to write a short journal entry about the two pills’ significance and share their thoughts with the class. I have them start with the movie in the hopes of drawing their interest in the unit early.

After the journal discussion, students will go into groups. Each group will be given a quote from a dystopian author to analyze, for example:

“There will come a time when it isn't 'They're spying on me through my phone' anymore. Eventually, it will be 'My phone is spying on me.'”

— Philip K. Dick

“You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them”

— Ray Bradbury.

Once their analysis is complete, each group will paint a person to share their thoughts. This exercise is intended to introduce students to dystopian themes and get them used to relating those themes to reality.

For the first homework assignment, students will be asked to go around their homes and make a list of all electronic devices in the house, taking special note of electronics that have cameras or are connected to the internet. They will also create a second list of all the social media platforms they engage with regularly.

The second day of the unit will begin with me giving students an introduction to dystopia as a genre and its hallmarks. I will ask them to provide examples of dystopian fiction that they have seen in pop culture. Then I will use the lists to discuss surveillance and censorship in dystopias.

Once these activities are completed, students will hopefully have the knowledge and skills necessary to discuss dystopian themes and ideas.

The Core Text

Readings and Inclass Time

This unit will be divided up into three weeks, one for each part of *Fahrenheit 451*. Students will be expected to finish most of each part over the weekend, hopefully finishing off anything that remains before the second or third meeting of the week. In-class time will be divided between discussions, group work, occasional clips from *The Matrix* when pertinent, and a weekly Socratic seminar.

Socratic Seminar

At the end of every week, there will be a Socratic seminar. The primary purpose of the seminars is to give students experience in discussing and analyzing the content of the texts without me guiding them. The secondary goal is to allow students who are struggling with the text to learn from their peers.

Potential Seminar question per week/part:

- Part One: The Hearth and the Salamander
 - How does the technology within the text compare to technology in the modern world? Does technology improve the quality of life for Montag and Mildred?
- Part two: The Sieve and the Sand
 - How are people in the world of *Fahrenheit 451* controlled and manipulated; be specific?
- Part Three: Burning Bright
 - *Fahrenheit 451* was written in 1953, and its assumptions about the future are definitely of 1953. How might the of *Fahrenheit 451* differ if it was written with the modern assumption of the future? How would this affect Montag's plan to rebel?

Additional Readings

While both *The Matrix* and *Fahrenheit 451* are cornerstones of the dystopian genre, neither is the be-all-end-all. Many texts and films that exist both inside and outside the cannon can capture similar themes. Other works that might work in a similar unit include:

Little Brother by Cory Doctorow-

Little Brother is a YA novel that holds the distinction of being a dystopian text set in the modern-day, showing the descent into dystopia and the fight against it. The story puts a heavy emphasis on tech and how it can be used to oppress or liberate. *Little*

Brother follows Marcus, a computer-savvy teen who is falsely labeled a person of interest after a terrorist attack causes San Francisco to go on high alert.

Equilibrium by Kurt Wimmer-

Equilibrium shares many qualities with *Fahrenheit 451*. It's set in a future where all art and emotion have been declared illegal to eliminate all wars and conflict. The population is kept in line by a combination of propaganda and mandatory drugs that suppress emotions. The story follows Cleric John Preston, this setting's equivalent of a fireman, whose job is to punish what they call "sense offenders."

1984 by George Orwell-

1984 is, of course, the definitive work of dystopian fiction to which all others are compared. Orwell was able to create a world that still feels early relevant to this day a feat that even *Fahrenheit 451* doesn't always manage.

Final Evaluation

Students will be asked to write a short research paper using the prompt below:

Identify elements of a dystopia in *The Matrix* and/or *Fahrenheit 451*. Looking at today's society, how close are we to embodying the dystopian elements of *The Matrix* and/or *Fahrenheit 451*? Give evidence from at least three credible sources.

Work Cited

Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. Ballantine Books, 1953.

Wachowski, Lana, and Lilly Wachowski. *The Matrix*. Warner Bros., 1999.

Orwell, George. *1984*. Secker & Warburg, 1949.

Doctorow, Cory. *Little Brother*. Tor Books, 2008.

Wimmer, Kurt. *Equilibrium*. Miramax Films, 2002.