SII199S LEC0141 First Year Seminar:
Modern Dystopia, Ancient Virtue

Wed. 1-3
Lillian Massey 205

Prof. R. Barney
Dept. of Philosophy
rachel.barney@utoronto.ca
Office: (1) Room 131, Lillian Massey Building; (2) Room 426, Jackman Humanities Building (100 St. George)
Office Hours: Mon. 2-3 in office (1), or by appointment in office (2)

Since the early 20th century, fiction writers and film makers have invented a new genre: the dystopia, depicting a bleak future world in which evil is in control and the individual seems powerless. Dystopia offers a dark mirror on the present, providing artist and audience alike with ways to think about political problems already in view. Classic dystopias ('Dystopia 1.0') like George Orwell's *1984* portray a society marked by oppression, mass surveillance, lies and propaganda, elite corruption, and the omnipresent threat of state violence (torture, imprisonment, 'disappearance'). These societies involve distinctively modern social organization and rely on the power of 20th century technologies, which give governments ever-tighter control of human life. In more recent dystopias ('Dystopia 2.0'), like those of Philip K. Dick, futuristic technology takes on a life of its own to threaten human nature itself, often in conjunction with corrupt capitalist oligopoly ('the Corporation') and environmental disasters.

Dystopias provide us with ways of thinking both about modern problems and very old ones. And they raise the question whether traditional moral ideas can still 'work' in a dystopian society. What does it mean to be a good person in a society ruled by evil? Is it rational even to try to do the right thing, if it is (almost) certain to fail? What does it mean to be a hero in a dystopian society, and what is heroism worth if nobody ever hears about it? Given that (almost) everyone in a dystopia is complicit in its evils, who can be held responsible for them? (The rulers? Everybody? Nobody?) What does dystopia tell us about human nature and society as it already exists? What, if anything, can we do to prevent our own society from turning into one?

We will consider (some of) these questions by juxtaposing dystopian works with some of the oldest moral reflections in the Western tradition. In particular, we will look at what ancient Greek literature has to say about the virtue most relevant to a dystopia, courage, and consider some relevant ancient versions of the hero. We will look at three different types of ancient heroism: *heroism as resistance* (Sophocles' *Antigone*, Stoicism), heroism as the *will to truth* (Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Plato's *Apology*), and heroism as *wily endurance* (Homer's *Odyssey*). The hope is that the ancient and modern will shed light on each other. We will also look as the occasion arises at some important modern non-fiction works which shed light on real-life dystopias and their moral implications.

Objectives:
Students in the course can hope to gain:

- improved skills at interpreting complex and difficult texts, both fiction and non-fiction
- improved analytical and reasoning skills
- improved writing skills
- an understanding of some of the greatest works of ancient Greek literature
- an understanding of the concept of dystopia, its political and ethical importance
- a basic understanding of some relevant features of real-world 20th century history
- familiarity with some of the great 20th and 21st -century dystopian art works
- improved skills at oral discussion and argument, both 'live' and online (through Blackboard)

Readings:
G. Orwell, *1984* (Penguin, 2008)
Homer, *Odyssey* (trans. Lombardo) (Hackett, 2000)
Sophocles*, Antigone, Oedipus, Electra* (Oxford World's Classics)
H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Penguin 2006)

These texts are available at the University of Toronto Bookstore. Further readings will be available as PDF's on Blackboard; these are marked with a * in the Schedule below. **Please use the assigned translations; others may be very different indeed, and you risk huge confusion if you are not reading the same version as everyone else.**

Expectations and Evaluation:

Regular class attendance and participation (in class and in the Blackboard discussions) is a course requirement; likewise doing the readings and viewing the films. The scheduled film viewings will be in Screening Room 1 (RL3023) at 7:00 PM on the Thursdays listed below; if you cannot attend, you must make other arrangements to view the film.

There will be a weekly writing assignment (WWA) of approximately one page due each week *in* class at the *start* of class (no extensions, excuses, late submissions, or e-mail submissions permitted), except on the first day and on dates when a paper is due. Topics of the weekly assignments will be announced in class the previous week and posted on Blackboard. **Both WWA's and papers will be graded 'blind': please put your student number but not your name on your assignment.**

Attendance, participation: 10%[1]
Weekly assignments (best 7 of 8): 25%
First paper (topics distributed Jan. 24, due Feb. 28, 7 pages): 25%
Second paper (due March 28, 7 pages): 30%

[1] 'Attendance and participation' means respectful, serious engagement with the course, the instructor, and each other: arriving late, leaving early, playing with electronics, private chitchat, and other forms of rudeness do not count as attendance and may result in a lower grade.

In-class writing assignment (April 4): 10%

Tentative Schedule:

Part I: Dystopia: The Basics

Week 1 (Jan. 10): Course Introduction; What is Dystopia and why does it matter?
Modern Reading: Forster, 'The Machine Stops'*

Week 2 (Jan. 17): Classic Dystopia
Reading: 1984
Movie Night: Thurs. Jan. 18, 7:00-9:00: TBA

Week 3 (Jan. 24): Real Dystopia: Totalitarianism and Evil
Reading: Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (especially Chs. 2-3, 8, pp. 230-3, 250-2, Postscript), Arendt *Totalitarianism* selections,* Milgram selections*, Browning selections*

Part II: Ancient Heroism: Heroism as Resistance

Week 4 (Jan. 31): The Individual vs. The State
Reading: Sophocles, *Antigone*

Week 5 (Feb. 7): Resistance of the Powerless
Reading: Sophocles, *Electra*
Movie Night: Thurs. Feb. 8, 7:00-9:00: Brazil

Week 6 (Feb. 14): The Stoic Hero
Ancient Reading: Epictetus excerpts (*Discourses* TBA)*
Modern Reading: selections from Dumbach & Newborn,* Levi,* Henley, 'Invictus'*

- *Winter Break* -

Part III: Heroism as Clever Endurance:

Week 7 (Feb. 28): Odysseus as Hero
Reading: Homer, *Odyssey* Books I-VIII, esp. Books I-II and V-VIII

Week 8 (March 7): Anarchic Dystopia: Nameless Hero in a Lawless World
Reading: Homer, *Odyssey*, Books IX-XIII
Movie Night Thurs. March 8: The Road

Week 9 (March 14): Revenge of the Outcast
Reading: Homer, *Odyssey* Books XIV-XXIV (selections: XV, XX, XXIV may be skimmed)
Movie Night Thurs. March 15: TBA (note: in RL3025)

Part IV: Heroism as the Will to Truth:

Week 10 (March 21): Secrets and Lies
Reading: Sophocles, *Oedipus*
Movie Night Thurs. March 22: Soylent Green

Week 11 (March 28): The Dangers of Inquiry
Reading: Plato, *Apology**

Week 12 (April 4): In-Class Reflections