Feel like a movie or a TV show?

The Ultimate Computer (1968, Season 2, Episode 23 of Star Trek: The Original Series) [DVD, 2008]. Hollywood: CBS Paramount.

Though the special effects and acting are quaint by today's standards, the original *Star Trek* episodes are sure to entertain and amuse weary students. This particular episode, with its focus on the theme of man vs. machine, also offers a study of social and cultural attitudes to information technology. In this episode, Kirk and company reluctantly test a new supercomputer, which has been designed by brilliant Dr. Daystrom, to autopilot and conduct full operations of the Federation starship. Will this powerful computer make humans obsolete? Captain Kirk's thoughts on this reflect the fears of the time – a fear that prevails today in different manifestations (e.g. fear of pervasiveness of technology, etc). But the supercomputer proves to be as flawed as its creator, completely taking over the ship's controls and putting the Starship crew in grave danger. Kirk must use his reasoning and intuition to save the day. But who will win: man or machine?

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) [Motion picture]. Produced & Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Co-written by Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke. [DVD, 2001]. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video.

Imagine that one day, your GPS unit takes control of your vehicle and not only ignores your instructions but also openly defies you: "I'm sorry, I can't do that, Dave." This is the type of scenario depicted in Kubrick's iconic film, which is a chilling exploration of man vs. machine.   The HAL 9000 computer runs most of the operations of the spaceship, Discovery One, and communicates verbally with the ship's crew. When HAL makes an error, he argues that it's human error since humans designed and programmed him. The astronauts are uneasy with HAL and discuss shutting him down, but they are unaware that he reads their lips and knows their plan. As a machine, HAL is narrowly focused on completing the instructions he is programmed to carry out. The humans thus become an obstacle to him, and he must get them out of the way. As in the *Star Trek* episode, the fear of artificially intelligent machines of the 1960s is conveyed in this film.

**William Blake: *Poems*
Pick any edition.**

Q. What does poetry have to do with learning about IS?
A. Poets efficiently capture complexity in a simplified form. They are particularly creative in the use of symbols (think GUI icons) and language (think abstraction). IS studies aside, however, what could be more soothing and refreshing than reading a poem? Take this beautiful verse from Blake, for example: "Blue curtains of the sky, scatter thy silver dew/On every flower that shuts its sweet eyes/ In timely sleep." Blake's poetry is widely available on the Web, but a collection is nice to have in hand while enjoying a latte or a cup of tea. As the title suggests, this Penguin edition includes all of Blake's poems including those that were not published in his lifetime.

Created by
© Louise Donnelly 2011

Contact Louise for more reading & viewing suggestions at

louise.donnelly@mail.utoronto.ca

Suggested Readings for Students in

INF1003 Information Systems, Services and Design

Creative approaches to learning about Information Systems (IS), Services and Design through the medium of imaginative literature and leisure reading

The Dangerous Hour: *A Sharon McCone Mystery* **by Marcia Muller. NY: Mysterious Press. FIC .MUL Baycrest Hospital.**

Detective fiction can promote the development of critical thinking as readers are prompted to focus on clues, logic, and situational details. In many contemporary mysteries and detective stories, the sleuths often use information technology to help them solve the crime. One example of a particularly tech-savvy private investigator is fictional Sharon McCone, whose agency uses Internet technology in their investigations. In *The Dangerous Hour*, McCone investigates the arrest of one of her new operatives, Julia, for credit card fraud. Is Julia guilty, or has she been framed? Readers of this novel can enjoy a good mystery story (with a bit of romance mixed in), while sharpening their critical thinking and observing a practical application of contemporary information systems.

Factoring Humanity **(1998) by Robert J. Sawyer. NY & Toronto: Tom Doherty Associates. PS8587 .A897 F3 1998. Robarts.**

This novel, by an award-wining Toronto author is described as a gripping sci-fi thriller. Set mainly on the University of Toronto campus, the protagonist is a U of T psychologist, (Heather) who is deciphering data streams transmitted by extraterrestrials of the Alpha Centauri system. Meanwhile her estranged husband, Kyle, is working on artificial intelligence and groundbreaking technology in quantum computing. Though some reader-reviewers of this book felt that the subplot in which the daughter of Heather and Kyle, accuses Kyle of having sexually abused her, is too contrived, overall they praised the novel's detailed hard science, exciting story and heartfelt insights into what it means to be human. Reader-reviewers of this book and other novels by Sawyer have also compared Sawyer to Asimov. Those who find science fiction's generally post-apocalyptic and dystopian stories too bleak may enjoy the positive and optimistic outlook in Sawyer's stories.
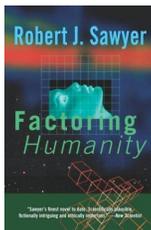
Why Read Outside the Syllabus?

Science fiction can celebrate ingenuity and inspire technological achievement aimed at improving quality of life. Many of our technological developments were first envisioned in science fiction As highly imaginative fiction with a focus on technology, sci-fi can help students to develop creative problem-solving approaches to understanding Information Technology.

He, She, and It: a novel **(1991) by Marge Piercy. New York: Random House. PS3566 .I4 H37 1991. Robarts**

Piercy's award-winning novel is set in the year 2059, in a post-apocalyptic, corporate-controlled world. It is a cyberpunk story and a mystery with elements of romance. The human protagonist named Shira falls in love with the male cyborg Yod, who was created to defend the Jewish free zone where Shira takes refuge. Although the cyborg of the novel was built by a man, a robotics expert, it was programmed by a woman, Shira's grandmother, who rebelled against the powerful corporations. She also developed security software designed to protect against online attacks. This interesting twist makes the reader stop and consider whether a man-dominated society can ever produce gender-neutral technologies. Though the story is bleak, the novel is useful for its exploration of the social and ethical impacts of design and implementation of technological systems.
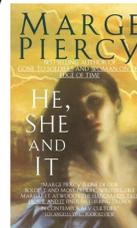
I, Robot **(1950) by Isaac Asimov. New York: Doubleday & Company. PS3551 .S56 I3. Robarts (multiple copies in UTL)**

Asimov, a highly imaginative and prolific author of science fiction, presented a generally positive, hopeful, and amusing view of humankind's relationship with technology. *I, Robot* is a series of interlinked stories that traces the (fictional) development of "robotics" technology from its early, primitive creations to the achievement of sophisticated robots that interact with humans and expertly perform human functions. The stories introduce the "Three Laws of Robotics," which serve as ethical guidelines for the creation of technology and its impact on humanity.

You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto **(2010) by Jaron Lanier**. **New York: Knopf Publishers. 303.4833 L287Y Faculty of Information (more copies in UTL)**

In this non-fiction book, Lanier, a software developer/ designer, and pioneer of Virtual Reality technology in Silicon Valley, outlines his concerns about the dehumanizing and anarchistic impact of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs). The book provides insights into the long-term impact of design decisions in the development of technology. For example, as successive systems are built upon existing software, they become "locked-in" to the effects of early design decisions. Unlike a textbook, this book is an engaging, thought-provoking and controversial read. Lanier suggests that as ICTs continue to expand, society is failing to take notice of the limitations imposed on people and the loss of individuality. Whether, the reader agrees with Lanier or not, the book provides an insightful view of the development of ICTs.

"Imagination is more important than knowledge."
Albert Einstein