

Reading the Future: “Futurama” and the New York World’s Fair 1939-40

“Technology: Good” by David Gelernter (pp. 122-129 in the Course Pack) from his book, *1939: The Lost World of the Fair*.

● In groups of 2:

In our first excerpt from David Gelernter’s book *1939: The Lost World of the Fair*, we have a chance to look at the idea of how the creators of the World’s Fair viewed the future and technology. This is a secondary source.

****Important!** Working carefully through these questions will also let you get some ideas that you can use on our next ‘essay with sources,’ a research paper on “Exploring a World’s Fair.”

- First, spend a few minutes reading / skimming the excerpt. As you read, first pay attention to the first ‘diary’ entry and then Gelernter’s writing about technology as represented in the World’s Fair in 1939-40.

1) In the opening short diary section (p. 122), Hattie Glassman says, “I have always wanted to *feel* what that time was like [...] that if, somehow, I could feel an era before I was born, the scales would fall from my eyes & I would then be able to feel *my own* life” (Gelernter 122). **As a group, explain what she means by this sentence in a short paraphrase.** Also, what is the advantage of using a diary (as personal writing) to give the reader a sense of what it was really like to visit the fair?

2) **As a group, decide on what Gelernter’s main argument or thesis is about technology at the World’s Fair.** Can you point to a sentence and a page number that states his position on the difference between the rate of technological change in the 1930s and today?

3) **List two examples of the most important practical technological improvements that people at the fair in 1939 would have experienced in their lifetimes.** You can use his list in the section on the bottom of p. **128-129** of the Course Pack for some ideas.

4) **Challenge Question:** Finally, is Gelernter an 'optimist' or a 'pessimist' about technology and why? (Why doesn't he think that more recent innovations like the computer are as important as elevators, washing machines and the other inventions on this list?)

● **Reporting Out** – One person on each team should be ready to report your group's answers to the class for these questions. We will collect the responses to see if we can understand Gelernter's arguments here and make some connections with the materials on the 'Futurama' exhibit.

(~20 minutes)