

Modern Science Fiction Film

CINE 202; ARTH 292; COML 292; ENGL 292

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TR 3:00-4:30pm

Van Pelt Manor Seminar Room (116)

Description

Science Fiction has been a cinematic genre for as long as there has been cinema—at least since Georges Méliès’s visionary *Trip to the Moon* in 1902. However, though science fiction films have long been reliable box office earners and cult phenomena, critical acknowledgement and analysis was slow to develop. Still, few genres reflect the sensibility of their age so transparently—if often unconsciously—or provide so many opportunities for filmmakers to simultaneously address social issues and expand the lexicon with new technologies. Given budgetary considerations and the appetite for franchises, science fiction auteurs face a difficult negotiation between artistic expression and lowest common denominator imperatives, the controversy over Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985) being perhaps the most infamous example. Nevertheless, many notable filmmakers have done their most perceptive and influential work in the scifi realm, including Gilliam, Ridley Scott, Steven Spielberg, David Cronenberg, James Cameron and Paul Verhoeven. This course will survey the scope of modern science fiction cinema, beginning with two films that inspired a rare wave of academic discourse, Scott’s *Alien* (1979) and *The Blade Runner* (1982), which attracted postmodernists, feminists, and film historians interested in how the works both drew from earlier movements (German Expressionism, Noir), and inspired new ones (Cyberpunk). We will look at smaller, more independent-minded projects, such as Michel Gondry’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and Duncan Jones’ *Moon* (2009) as well as risky, massively budgeted epics such as Spielberg’s *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (2001) and Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* (2010). We will also acknowledge highly cinematic television series that influenced the scope of modern scifi, including *The X-Files* (1993-2002) and the rebooted *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009).

Course Structure

This class is affiliated with the Film Culture Program at Gregory College House, though it is fully open to non-residents. As such, though, it has a more flexible construction than most classes, in keeping with the traditionally flexible schedule of FCP.

There are 28 course meetings (on Tuesdays and Thursdays) throughout the course of the semester. These are standard classroom dynamics—discussions of our films and readings. There are also affiliated weekly Thursday night screenings of the core films for our class, in the Film Lounge (4th Floor) of Van Pelt Manor, 3909 Spruce Street. I fully expect that you will view (or re-view, if you have seen them before) the films before discussion—though attendance at the screenings is entirely optional, with the exception of the night of your presentation (see “Assignments,” below).

There are also eight additional screening nights, of supplementary films and television programs likely to emerge in our TR discussions, if not as the primary focus. Those screenings, also in the Van Pelt Film Lounge and mostly on the weekends, are immediately followed by discussions, attended by various members of the Film Culture Program. Attendance at these screenings/discussions is entirely optional—but you may substitute any of those nights for formal class sessions.

In short, you need to attend a total of 26 class sessions or weekend screenings/discussions (out of the 36 total) over the course of the semester. The configuration is up to you. If you attend LESS than 26, your grade will suffer for each absence. Because of this flexibility, I won't be entertaining any explanations for missed classes beyond significant illness or emergency (cleared by your school).

Core Materials

Films:

The primary films for the class (required viewing): *Alien*, *The Blade Runner* (The Final Cut), *The Terminator*, *Brazil*, *The Fly*, *Robocop*, *Delicatessen*, *Dark City* (The Director's Cut), *The Matrix*, *AI: Artificial Intelligence*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Children of Men*, *Moon*, *District 9*.
Supplementary films and television programs (optional viewing): *Aliens*, *12 Monkeys*, *Videodrome*, *Starship Troopers*, *The X-Files* (see episodes below), *Battlestar Galactica* (see episodes below), *Inception*.

Readings:

Our readings are a varied mix of critical theory, film reviews, behind-the-scenes accounts, screenplays and literary inspirations. Some articles and chapters can be accessed from the Blackboard site. There are five additional books which must be purchased or borrowed (last time I checked on Amazon, the total was \$65.88). The books are on order at the Penn Book Center on 34th and Sansom:

- Annette Kuhn, ed. *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*. London: Verso, 1990.
- Paul Sammon, *Future Noir: The Making of The Blade Runner.* New York: Harper, 1996.
- Jack Matthews, *The Battle for Brazil: Terry Gilliam vs. Universal Pictures in the Fight to the Final Cut*. New York: Applause Books, Revised edition, 2000.
- Charlie Kaufman and Michel Gondry, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind: The Shooting Script*. New York: New Market Press, 2004.
- PD James, *The Children of Men*. New York: Vintage, 1992.

Assignments

There are no midterms or finals. Requirements:

1. Two 5-7 page papers and one 10 page paper. Topics are entirely up to you, beyond centering on the filmmakers or films (primary or secondary) for the class. At least two of the papers must incorporate readings from the semester schedule and/or additional research. Due dates are listed on the schedule—you can submit the papers in any order (in other words, the longer essay can be submitted on any of the three due dates).
2. One short presentation, delivered either alone or in partnership with another student from the class at one of our Thursday or weekend screenings. I will be asking for preferences, but cannot guarantee a particular film.
3. Participation in discussions; the quality of your contributions can either lower or raise your final grade by a full increment. Thoughtful postings on the blackboard discussion threads can augment your participation grade.

Contact Information

If you wish to meet with me, please feel free to send me an email at cdonovan@upenn.edu to schedule an appointment. Or you can simply track me down; I am usually available on weekday afternoons in my office in 127 Van Pelt Manor, or immediately after our Thursday night screenings.

Semester Schedule

- 1/13: Reading: JP Telotte, "Science Fiction Film: The Critical Context."
Screening: *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979)
- 1/15: Weekend Screening: *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986)
- 1/18: Discussion: *Alien* films
- 1/20: Readings: James Kavanagh, "Feminism, Humanism and Science in *Alien*." (AZ)
Judith Newton: "Feminism and Anxiety in *Alien*." (AZ)
Barbara Creed: "*Alien* and the Monstruous-Feminine." (AZ)
Screening: *The Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982)
- 1/25: Readings: Gregg Rickman, "They Did Sight Simulation In My Brain: Philip K. Dick on *Blade Runner*."
Paul Sammon, "Script Wars," "The Shoot," and "Voice-Overs, San Diego, and a New Happy Ending," from *Future Noir*.
William Whittington, "Blade Runners: A Crisis in Voicing Authority, Identity and Spectacle."
- 1/27: Readings: Janet Staiger, "Future Noir: Contemporary Representations of Visionary Cities."
Vivian Sobchack, "Cities on the Edge of Time: The Urban Science Fiction Film."
Screening: *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984)
- 1/31: Discussion: James Cameron
- 2/3: Reading: Hassan Melehy, "Bodies without Organs: Cyborg Cinema of the 1980s."
Screening: *Brazil* (Terry Gilliam, 1985)
- 2/5: Weekend Screening: *12 Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995)
- 2/8: Reading: Jack Matthews, *The Battle for Brazil*.
- 2/10: Reading: *Brazil* annotated screenplay (in Matthews)
Screening: *The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1986)
- 2/12: Weekend Screening: *Videodrome* (David Cronenberg, 1983)
- 2/15: Discussion: David Cronenberg. **FIRST PAPER DUE**
- 2/17: Reading: Ernest Mathijs, "AIDS References in the Critical Reception of David Cronenberg"
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cinema_journal/v042/42.4mathijs.html
Screening: *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987)
- 2/19: Weekend Screening: *Starship Troopers* (Paul Verhoeven, 1997)
- 2/22: Reading: JP Telotte, "The Science Fiction Film as Uncanny Text: *Robocop*."
Rob Kaveney: "Director as Parodist: Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers*."
- 2/24: Discussion: Paul Verhoeven
Screening: *Delicatessen* (Jeunet and Caro, 1992)
- 3/1: Reading: Scott Tobias, "The New Cult Canon: *Delicatessen*."
<http://www.avclub.com/articles/delicatessen,42887/>

- 3/3: Discussion: Jean-Pierre Jeunet
Screening: *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998)
- 3/8: SPRING BREAK
- 3/10: SPRING BREAK
- 3/15: Reading: Roger Ebert, "Great Movies: *Dark City*."
<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20051106/REVIEWS08/511060302>
- 3/17: Discussion: *Dark City*. **SECOND PAPER DUE**
Screening: *The Matrix* (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999)
- 3/18: Weekend Screening: *The X-Files* (Christopher Carter, 1993-2003): *Nisei*, *The Blessing Way*, *Paper-Clip* (Seasons 2-3)
- 3/19: Weekend Screening: *The X-Files*: *Clyde Bruckman's Final Repose*, *War of the Coprophages*, *Jose Chung's from Outer Space* (Season 3)
- 3/22: Reading: Slavoj Zizek: "*The Matrix*, or the Two Sides of Perversion."
Christopher Grau, "Bad Dreams, Evil Demons, and the Experience Machine: Philosophy and *The Matrix*."
- 3/24: Reading: James Pryor, "What's So Bad about Living in the Matrix?"
Screening: *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001)
- 3/29: Readings: Brian Aldiss, "Supertoys Last All Summer Long."
http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/5.01/ffsupertoys_pr.html
Jonathan Rosenbaum, "The Best of Both Worlds."
<http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.com/?p=6306>
Andrew Gordon, "*AI (Artificial Intelligence): Separation Anxiety*."
Steven Spielberg
- 3/31: Discussion: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004)
Screening: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004)
- 4/1: Weekend Screening: *Battlestar Galactica* (Ron Moore, 2003-2009): Miniseries, 33 (Season 1)
- 4/5: Reading: Kaufman, Gondry, Bismuth, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*
Shooting script
- 4/7: Readings: C.D.C. Reeve, "Two Blue Ruins: Love and Memory in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*."
George Toles, "Trying to Remember Clementine."
Screening: *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuaron, 2006)
- 4/12: Readings: Mark Rahner, "Alfonso Cuaron Searches for Hope in *Children of Men*."
<http://community.seattletimes.nwsour.com/archive/?date=20061222&slug=cuaron22>
PD James, *The Children of Men*, "Omega."
- 4/14: Reading: PD James, *The Children of Men*, "Alpha."
- Screening: *Moon* (Duncan Jones, 2009)
- 4/19: Readings: Peter Knecht, "Man on his Moon: Duncan Jones Pulls Off Sci-Fi for 5 Million."
http://www.indiewire.com/article/man_on_the_moon_duncan_jones_details_his_sci-fi_debut/
Vicki Reid, "Duncan Jones on Filming *Moon*."
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/space/5780037/Duncan-Jones-on-filming-Moon.html>
Lewis Wallace, "*Moon* is Duncan Jones's Homage to Classic Sci-Fi."
<http://www.wired.com/underwire/2009/06/duncan-jones-moon/>
- 4/21: Discussion: *Moon*

- Screening: *District 9* (Neil Blomcham, 2009)
- 4/26: Readings: David Itzkoff, "A Young Director Brings a Spaceship and a Metaphor in for a Landing"
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/06/movies/06district.html>
Annaliza Savage, "Xenophobia, Racism Drive Alien Relocation."
<http://www.wired.com/underwire/2009/08/xenophobia-racism-drive-alien-relocation-in-district-9/>
Armond White, "From Mothership to Bullship."
<http://www.nypress.com/article-20206-from-mothership-to-bullship.html>
Roger Ebert, "Not in Defense of Armond White."
http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2009/08/in_defense_of_armond_white.html
- 4/28: Bonus Screening: *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010)
- 5/2: Finals Period **FINAL PAPER DUE**