

**CIN 211F Science Fiction Film****Fall Term 2017-16**

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Course Description

This course is study of science fiction (SF) films. This course is open to students who have not taken the introductory CIN 105Y. It is also open to Cinema Studies program students. Familiarity with film analysis will be helpful but not essential. We will consider cultural and political contexts impinging on the SF genre's narrative and image components and the films' production and critical reception. The general goal of the course is to familiarize students with SF Cinema as genre films. Emphasis falls on the period between 1950 and the present.

The course opens with 1996's *Independence Day*. This science fiction film received the endorsement of American President Bill Clinton after a screening at the White House, and went on to enjoy the most commercially successful opening week of any film ever, and was the top grossing film of the year and the sixth top-grossing film in film history. It was well reviewed across the boards.

This is ironic given the longer history of SF films in the American movie industry and the low regard of the genre, literary and cinematic, that prevailed for most of its history. By the 1990s, SF had become one of the leading genres, a twenty-year run in 1996 after the twin successes of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *Star Wars: A New Hope*. The major commercial and cultural importance of SF films has fluctuated a bit but has never really diminished

Most familiar film genres, like Westerns, Horror, Musicals and Crime Films, have been in continuous production for decades with films of their generic types being made with seasonal regularity. These classic "major" genres are usually identified with Hollywood's productions overall. Unlike these perennial genres, science fiction films historically have been more intermittent. They have also been international in origin. Until recently, SF films enjoyed brief cycles of production interspersed by fallow periods when very few SF films were made and even fewer achieved (or deserved) popularity.

In classical American filmmaking of the studio era (1925-1960), SF was regarded as a B-film genre, or more often as a juvenile genre (e.g., "Flash Gordon" serial [1936]). On the other hand, during the same decades, some of the most expensive and ambitious films made anywhere were European SF, like *Metropolis* (1927), a silent German super-production and the British film, scripted by H.G. Wells, *Things to Come* (1936). However, these films tended to be prestigious one-offs. Cultural and commercial factors made SF film a much less consistent and therefore less definable historical genre.

The low status and intermittence of SF films began to change around 1950. Hollywood launched a series of SF films beginning in 1949. These films corresponded closely to rising social interest in UFO's, in space travel by rocket ship, and soon deepening anxiety over the prospect of a nuclear Third World War, which ran high during the first years of the Cold War, the 1950s. Several of these films had high production values (i.e., *Destination Moon*, 1949) while others were quite cheaply made. But the genre was escaping its B-movie status. Juvenile serial SF

found a new home on nascent network television with revamped series like *Flash Gordon* and TV originals like *Captain Video* (1949-1955).

In parallel to Hollywood and American TV, British cinema launched its own cycle of SF films. More significantly, this was paralleled by a more sophisticated TV SF in Britain, represented by *The Quatermass Experiment* (1953) and a number of serious “teleplay” adaptations - of SF novels and plays 1984, *The Time Machine*, and *R.U.R.*

Over the course of the 1950s, the circulation and reputation of literary SF improved. Sustained through “pulp” magazines in the 1930s and 1940s, SF fiction now began to appear in paperback and trade-book form. SF authors created longer and more ambitious works (i.e., Isaac Asimov, *Foundation* and its two sequels). Because of these factors, the 1950s were dubbed the “golden age” for literary SF.

The relationship between the SF film genre and literary SF tended at the time to be antagonistic. However, some of the best SF films of the era were intelligent adaptations (i.e., *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*). Later, a succession of adult-intended TV SF series offered thoughtful scriptwriting (i.e., *The Twilight Zone*, *Dr. Who*, *The Prisoner* and, most famously, *Star Trek*). The quality and reception of SF films still varied wildly. A few SF films advanced topical concerns over the course of the late 1950s and well into the 1960s and 1970s. A number were now mainstream studio products with important stars and were linked to anxious issues like nuclear weapons (*Fail Safe* [1964]), urban decay-overpopulation (*Soylent Green* 1973)), racial unrest (*Planet of the Apes* [1968]), totalitarianism, and advancing technologies, including artificial intelligence and biomedicine. At the same time, European art-cinema auteurs, like Francois Truffaut, Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, and Jean-Luc Godard, made occasional and quite philosophical SF films. However, just as many SF films were exploitation efforts meant for drive-in theatres (*Last Woman on Earth* [1960]) and spoofs (*The Tenth Victim* [1965], *Barbarella* [1968]).

Setting a new high standard for the genre, Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) showed that SF could sustain expensively produced spectacular films with major thematic ambitions. However, the early 1970s turned out to be a commercially depressed era for SF Film despite the appearance of ambitious films like *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (starring David Bowie). Critics saw these films as dour and pessimistic, which they were. The genre was commercially revived by *Star Wars* (1977) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). This set off a new cycle for the genre characterized by high production values and special effects spectacle. The commercial turn around was indicated, for example, by the return of *Star Trek*, in the form of expensive feature films, after ten years of the original series’ half-life in syndication and fan agitation since *Star Trek*’s cancellation in 1969. Like *Star Wars*, which grew into a trilogy (and later a sextet), *Star Trek* eventually extended to ten feature films (1979-2002) and four new television series (1987-2005).

The new SF film cycle has, despite ups and downs, continued until the present, as mentioned above. In the 2000s, and after the success of *Independence Day*, SF has often continued to cross-pollenate with the “blockbuster.” Several SF films are among the most successful films ever made (i.e., *Avatar* [2009]). SF now regularly attracts major stars and important directors like Steven Spielberg and Ridley Scott and Christopher Nolan. The genre it did not draw on such resources in the past. (Lucas’s *Star Wars* and Scot’s *Alien* featured casts of unknowns). Other extremely popular contemporary SF films include the *Matrix Trilogy* (1999-2003), the *Alien* cycle (1979-2017, six films); the relaunching of *Star Wars* (2015) and *Star Trek* (2009), the remake of the *Planet of the Apes* trilogy (2011-2017) and a regular output of single films like *Moon*, *Fifth Element*, *Sunshine*, *Oblivion*, *Elysium*, *The Edge of Tomorrow*, *The Arrival*.

In addition, there has been a proliferation of low-budget features and TV series (*Battlestar Gallactica* [2005-2009], *Firefly* [2002]). Today, the SF cinema is in a robust state.

As this preface suggests, covering the whole genre is not possible. This course is very selective and it is compartmentalized in treating SF Film. Instead of following a strict historical path, the course is organized along the lines of three plot types: the fantastic voyage, the alien invasion, and urban dystopia.

### Course goals

1. To provide an intensive basic survey of the SF Film genre, its social and political contexts and to pursue its definition in critical terms with respect to plotting and iconography.
2. To provide students to engage in comprehension of selected critical texts on the SF genre and to pursue analysis and interpretation of selected SF films through class discussions and writing analytical essays.
3. To provide an opportunity or students to conduct research into film and specifically the genre of science fiction and to articulate that research and students' insight through writing assignments. *In this course, students will select the SF films they choose to write about with guidance from instructor and TAs.*

**Course Times and Place:** lecture-screening at **Town Hall, Monday 3-6**; tutorials as assigned. *Note that food and beverages are not permitted in Town Hall. I*

### **Required Readings:**

*This course does not have a textbook.* Both assigned readings and some recommended readings will be posted on Blackboard.

### **General Recommended Reading:**

Booker, M. Keith, *Alternate Americas: Science Fiction and American Culture* (Praeger, 2006).  
 Boud, Mark, et al. eds. *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (Routledge, 2011), chaps 5, 8, 10, 14, 15, 47, 48, 49, 55.  
 Bould, Mark, *Science Fiction* (Routledge 2012).  
 Bould, Mark, et al. *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (Routledge, 2009) chaps 5, 9, 11, 13, 14, 16.  
 Bukatman, Scott, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Duke, 1993).  
 Hoberman, J. *An Army of Phantoms: American Movies and the Making of the Cold War* (The New Press, 2011)  
 King, Goeff and Tanya Krzywinska, *Science Fiction Cinema: from Outerspace to Cyberspace*. (Wallflower, 2000).  
 Kuhn, Annette, ed. *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*. (Verso, 1990).  
 Redmond, Sean, ed. *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader* (Wallflower, 2007).  
 Redmond, Sean and Leon Marvell, *Endangering Science Fiction* (Routledge, 2016).

Sobchack, Vivian, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, revised edition (Ungar, 1993).

Telotte, J. P. *Science Fiction Film* (Cambridge, 2001).

### **Evaluation and Requirements:**

First analysis essay 10/10 in tutorials; **15%**

Mid-term test: 11/13; **20%**

Second analysis essay: 12/4 in tutorials **20%**;

Course examination: **30%** TBA

Participation: **15%**. Note that attendance will be taken at each tutorial session and be counted toward final grade. Students are expected to attend all lecture-screening sessions.

## **Course Outline**

### **Introduction to the Genre of Science Fiction Film**

Week 1

9/11

#### **Science Fiction—Contemporary Self-Consciousness**

**Lecture:** Part one: What is a Film Genre?

Part two: Science Fiction in the Cinema, a quick survey

**Screening:** *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich 1996)

**Readings:** Steve Neale, "Definitions of Genre"; Adam Roberts, "Defining Science Fiction"; Vivian Sobchack, "Images of Wonder."

**Recommended:** Michael Rogin, *Independence Day* (a short book, a critical study of the film).

Week 2

9/18

#### **A Genre Rises Again – the Resurgence of Science Fiction Film at the Dawn of the Cold War**

**Lecture:** The SF Cycle of the 1950s, Total War and the Imagination of Disaster.

**Screening:** *The War of the Worlds* (USA, Byron Haskin, 1953); *The War of the Worlds* (USA, Steven Spielberg, 2005; *excerpt*).

**Readings:** Susan Sontag, "Imagination of Disaster"; H.G. Wells, "The Eve of War."

**Recommended:** H.G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (the 1897 novel on which); Barry Forshaw, *The War of the Worlds* (a short book, a critical study of the film).

### **Fantastic Voyages**

## Week 3

9/25

*Fantastic Voyages (1)*—a 1950s space adventure prototype**Lecture:** Space Opera in the Age of Exploration, Or, Freud Destroys the Krel**Screening:** *Forbidden Planet* (Wilcox, 1956)**Readings:** Gary Westfall, "Space Opera" (*Cambridge Companion to SF*), Peter Biskind, "Pods and Blobs: The Other Americans" (*Seeing Is Believing*)**Recommended:** William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (loosely the source of the film's plot and characters)

## Week 4

10/2

*Fantastic Voyages (2)*—East German SF Film**Lecture:** Journey to the Aggressor Planet; SF Cinema and the East-Bloc**Screening:** *Der Schweigende Stern (The Silent Star)* (East Germany-Poland Kurt Maetzig, 1960).**Readings:** Pierre Sorlin, "The Cinema: American Weapon for the Cold War"; Stefan Soldovieri, "Socialists in Space."

**Note: Week 5 OCT 9 Monday -- Thanksgiving, No class. Tutorials as per usual. First analysis papers due**

## Week 6

10/16

*Fantastic Voyages (3)* -- Kubrick**Lecture:** The Gates of Infinity**Screening:** *2001: A Space Odyssey* (USA, Stanley Kubrick, 1968; 138 min.) and *A Trip to the Moon* (France, Georges Melies, 1914, 14 min.).**Readings:** Tom Gunning, "Trip to the Moon"; Barry Keith Grant, "Sensuous Elaboration: Reason and the Visible;" Michel Chion, *Kubrick's Cinema Odyssey* (excerpt); Arthur C. Clarke, "The Sentinel."**Recommended:** Arthur C. Clarke, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

## Week 7

10/23

*Fantastic Voyages (5)*—*Star Trek Returns***Lecture:** From the Light of Liberalism to Dark Betrayal: The Legend of Khan in the *Star Trek* Universe.**Screening:** *Star Trek Into Darkness* (J.J. Abrams, 2013; excerpts from "Space Seed" (1976) and *The Wrath of Khan* (1982).**Readings:** "Biography of Khan" (no author); TBA***Aliens—Variations on a Motif***

## Week 8

*Aliens (1)*—*Benevolence and Threat***Lecture:** *The Cold War and Political Allegory*

- 10/30      **Screening:** *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (USA, Robert Wise, 1951), excerpt, *The Thing from Another World* (1951).  
**Readings:** Mark Jancovich, "Alien Forms: Horror and Science Fiction in the 1950s" (*Rational Fears*); Mark Jancovich, "Re-examining the 1950s Invasion Narratives" (*Liquid Metal*); Peter Biskind, "Pods and Blobs – Friends in High Places" (*Seeing Is Believing*); J. Hoberman, *The Army of Phantoms* (excerpt); Joshua Pardon, "Interpreting *The Day the Earth Stood Still*."
- Week 9 11/6      **Reading Week – no classes**
- Week 10      **mid-term test**  
 11/13      *Aliens* (2)— "They're Here!!!"  
**Lecture:** *Absorbing the Human*  
**Screening:** *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (USA, Don Siegal, 1956) *The Blob* (1958).  
**Readings:** Peter Biskind, "The Russians Are Coming, Aren't They?" (*Liquid Metal*); "Picturing Paranoia: Interpreting *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*".
- Week 11      *Aliens* (3) – *Very Bright Lights in the Sky*  
 11/20      **Lecture:** *Re-enchanted Visitors*  
**Screening:** *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (USA, Steven Spielberg, 1977).  
**Readings:** J.P. Telotte, "The Science Fiction Film as Marvelous Text: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*" (*Science Fiction Film*).  
**Recommended:** J. Allen Hynek, *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Enquiry* (1972) (scientific study); Andrew Gordon, *Empire of Dreams: the Science Fiction Films of Steven Spielberg*, chaps 3 and 4.
- Anti-Utopias, Dystopias**
- Week 12      *Dystopias* (1)—*European Art Film SF*  
 11/27      **Lecture:** French New Wave SF: Speculative Dystopia  
**Screening:** *La jetee* (France, Chris Marker, 1963); *Alphaville* (*Alphaville, une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution*, France, Jean-Luc Godard, 1965); excerpt, *THX 1138* (USA, George Lucas, 1971).  
**Readings:** M. Ryan and D. Kellner, "Technophobia/Dystopia" (*Liquid Metal*); Vivian Sobchack, "Cities on the Edge of Time: The Urban Science Fiction Film" (*Liquid Metal*); Alan Woolfolk, "Disenchantment and Rebellion in *Alphaville*."
- Week 13      **second essay due – in tutorials**  
 12/4

*Dystopias (2)—Replicants and Cops*

**Lecture:** Topography of a Phantom Postmodernist City.

**Screening:** *Blade Runner* (USA, Ridley Scott, 1982, 117 min.) plus excerpt from *Ghost in the Shell* (1995).

**Readings:** Wong Kin Yeun, "On the Edge of Spaces: *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell*" (*Liquid Metal*) Vivian Sobchack, "Postfuturism" (*Liquid Metal*); David C. Ryan, "Dreams of Postmodernism and Thoughts of Mortality: A Twentieth-Fifth Anniversary Retrospective of *Blade Runner*" (*Senses of Cinema*)

**Recommended:** Scott Bukatman, *Blade Runner*. (a short book, critical study of the film); Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sleep?* (original novel).

#### **"Make-Up Monday: details TBA**

*Dystopias —Robots and Workers*

**Lecture:** Topography of a Phantom Modernist City

**Screening:** *Metropolis* (Germany, Fritz Lang, 1927).

**Readings:**

*Reader:* Han Gunther Pflaum, "Metropolis" (*Classical German Silent Films*); Ludmilla Jordanova, "Science, Machines and Gender" (*Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*).

**Recommended:** Thea von Harbou, *Metropolis* (1927/2003) (source novel).

#### **Cinema Studies Institute policy:**

*Email:* Although the course instructor and the TAs will try to answer mails in a timely fashion, we cannot guarantee any response within a set time frame. If you have a time-dependent matter to discuss, please see me or your TA during office hours or make an appointment to see the instructor.

*Cell Phones:* Cell phones are to be turned off for class. People who text during class will be asked to leave, and need permission to re-enter the course. People who receive calls during class will be asked to leave. Bottom line: turn your cell phone off and save everyone embarrassment and annoyance.

*Laptops:* Unless otherwise specified by the instructor, laptops are for note-taking only. Anyone found using their laptop for email, unauthorised browsing, etc. will not be permitted to bring a laptop to class.

*Plagiarism:* The University of Toronto considers academic honesty and integrity to be important to your education. Any conduct that violates the University's academic integrity standards will result in serious disciplinary action.

*Paper Due Dates:* Extensions will be given ONLY for properly documented medical or family emergencies. Late papers MUST be handed in to the Cinema Studies Program Assistant.

