The Science Fiction Genre

FITV 3571; Summer 2018  Dr. Lance Strate, Faculty Memorial Hall, Rm. 434A
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Office Hours:  Mondays 4:30-5:30 or by appointment

Required Texts:

• Vivian Sobchack, Screening Space, The American Science Fiction Film (2nd Ed.)
• Philip K. Dick, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep
• William Gibson, Neuromancer
• H.G. Wells, War of the Worlds
• Additional Readings available via ARES (http://reserves.library.fordham.edu)

Course Objectives:

1. To explore the science fiction film and media genre, including its history, economics, aesthetics, and semiotics (use of signs and symbols to convey meaning).

2. To examine the larger field of media and popular culture theory and criticism through a case study of the science fiction genre.

3. To become familiar with the variety of media analysis techniques, such as the sociological, ideological, psychoanalytic, semiotic, aesthetic, auteurist, industrial, and media/technological, that are used to study science fiction films and media.

4. To engage in criticism and analysis of science fiction films and media.
**Evaluation:**

1. **Participation.** Participation will account for 25% of the final grade. You are expected to attend our weekly class meetings, to arrive on time and attend the full class session, and to participate sensibly based on the readings and other assignments, and to participate in our online discussions in a timely and sensible fashion.

2. **Papers.** You will be required to write two papers for this class in which you engage in analysis of some aspect of the science fiction genre, drawing on the assigned readings, screenings, etc., and additional sources. The papers will be graded based on quality and originality of the analysis, as well as basics such as spelling, grammar, etc. Papers should be at least 1500 words in length, not including references. The first paper will be due on July 19th and the second on August 2nd. Each paper will account for 25% of your final grade.

3. **Final Examination.** There will be a final examination based on the readings, screenings, and class discussion, which will account for 25% of your final grade.

Academic integrity is the pursuit of scholarly activity in an honest, truthful, and responsible manner. Violations of academic integrity include, but are not limited to, plagiarism, cheating on exams, falsification, unapproved collaboration, and destruction of library materials. For more information on what specifically constitutes violations of academic integrity and the university’s policy toward violations of academic integrity, see: <http://www.fordham.edu/undergraduateacademicintegrity>.

If you believe that you have a disabling condition that may interfere with your ability to participate in the activities, coursework, or assessment of the object of this course, you may be entitled to accommodations. Please schedule an appointment to speak with me immediately or you may go to the Office of Disability Services (O’Hare Hall on the Lower Level, 718.817.0655). Under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, all students, with or without disabilities, are entitled to equal access to the programs and activities of Fordham University.

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Tentative Schedule
July 5  Online: Introduction to the Class  
Reading Due: THE SYLLABUS  
Screening Due: Edison’s Frankenstein (Dawley, 1910)  
Screening Due: A Trip to the Moon (Méliès, 1902)

July 9  In Class Meeting: The Science Fiction Genre, Analysis & Criticism  
Screening Due: Metropolis (Lang, 1926)  
Reading Due: H.G. Wells, War of the Worlds

July 10  Online: Panic Attack  
Listen Online: War of the Worlds radio broadcast (Welles, 1938)  
<http://www.mercurytheatre.info>  
Reading Due: Heyer, “America Under Attack”

July 11  Online: Alien Invasion Then and Now  
Screening Due: War of the Worlds (Haskin, 1953)  
Screening Due: War of the Worlds (Spielberg, 2005)  
Reading Due: Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster”

July 12  Online: The Alien Monster and the Alien Messiah  
Screening Due: The Thing from Another World (Nyby, 1951)  
Screening Due: The Day the Earth Stood Still (Wise, 1951)  
Screening Due: Sobchack, Introductory material and Chap. 1

July 16  In Class Meeting: Alien Subversion and Monsters from the Id  
Screening Due: Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Siegal, 1956)  
Screening Due: Forbidden Planet (Wilcox, 1956)  
Reading Due: Sobchack, Chap. 2

July 17  Online: Future Visions  
Screening Due: 3 Star Trek episodes “The City on the Edge of Forever” (Season 1), “Who Mourns for Adonais?,” & “The Apple,” (Season 2)

July 18  Online: The Science Fiction Art Film 1  
Screening Due: Alphaville (Godard, 1965)  
Reading Due: Sobchack, Chap. 3

July 19  Online: The Science Fiction Art Film 2  
Screening Due: 2001: A Space Odyssey (Kubrick, 1968)

July 23  In Class Meeting: The Science Fiction Blockbuster
Screening Due: *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977)
Screening Due: *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (Spielberg, 1982)

**July 24**
Online: The Horror Hybrid
Screening Due: *Alien* (Scott, 1979)
Screening Due: *Videodrome* (Cronenberg, 1982)
Reading Due: Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (due 7/25)

**July 25**
Online: Paranoid Visions
Screening Due: *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982/1991)
Reading Due: Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*

**July 26**
Online: Time Lines and Loops
Screening Due: *La Jetée* (Marker, 1962)
Screening Due: *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984)
Screening Due: *12 Monkeys* (Gilliam, 1995)

**July 30**
In Class Meeting: Postfuturism
Screening Due: *Total Recall* (Verhoeven, 1990)
Screening Due: *Wild Palms* (Stone, 1993)
Reading Due: Sobchack, Chap. 4
Reading Due: Gibson, *Neuromancer* (for 7/31)

**July 31**
Online: Cyberspace and Cyberpunk
Reading Due: Gibson, *Neuromancer*
Screening Due: *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999)

**Aug. 1**
Online: Alien Encounters
Screening Due: *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009)
Screening Due: *Arrival* (Villeneuve, 2016)

**Aug. 2**
Online: Space and Survival
Screening Due: *Battlestar Galactica* (Moore, 2004) episode "33"
Screening Due: *Interstellar* (Nolan, 2014)

**Aug. 5**
In Class Meeting: Final Exam
This course was originally a film class, but has been broadened to consider the science fiction genre across a variety of different media, especially television, and also including books, comics, magazines, theater, radio, and digital media.

There are several reasons why it is worthwhile to study the science fiction genre. First, science
fiction offers opportunities for thought experiments, allowing scientists and social scientists to imagine possible future developments in science and technology, and to consider their consequences. Second, as a form of popular entertainment, science fiction tends to reflect its audience’s values, beliefs, and attitudes, fears and aspirations, ideologies and mythologies. By studying science fiction as a form of popular culture, we can uncover the source of its appeal to and influence on audiences, and gain greater understanding of ourselves as human beings, individually and collectively. Third, as a film genre, we can use science fiction to better understand the motion picture, one of the oldest and most prestigious of the audiovisual media, and the medium that presents us with the most extended and complex forms of visual communication. The study of film provides one of the best methods for gaining visual literacy, a skill of increasing importance for mass media consumers and practitioners alike.

The study of genre or category is one way to approach the study of film and popular culture. A course such as Hollywood Genres tends to survey and compare a number of different genres such as the western, the detective story, and the war movie. This course, on the other hand, provides the alternative of focusing on one particular genre, and studying its history, development, and continuities over time. While the object of study is narrower than many other courses, the critical methods and skills involved, and the experience of in-depth study, are easily transferred to other subject areas.

Although the science fiction genre has often been disparaged, it does have a respectable pedigree: some scholars trace its origins to Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, or to Thomas More’s *Utopia*, or even to Plato’s *Republic*; most, however, place its birth in 1818 with the publication of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Science fiction blossomed in the late 19th century, mostly due to the efforts of Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, Jules Verne, and H.G. Wells. And while the genre was not taken seriously in literary circles during the early 20th century, it did gain increasing popularity, especially in the United States through the publication of pulp magazines such as *Amazing Stories*, edited and published by Hugo Gernsback, who is credited with coining the term *science fiction* in 1929 and after whom the Hugo Awards are named, and *Astounding Stories* (now known as Analog), whose best-known editor was John W. Campbell, Jr. Some of the writers publishing in these magazines include Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert A. Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, A. E. van Vogt, Theodore Sturgeon, Frank Herbert, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Isaac Asimov, the most prolific author in American history with over 500 books to his credit. During the mid to late 20th century, science fiction was embraced by serious novelists such as Kurt Vonnegut and Doris Lessing. Science fiction themes can be found in some of the earliest motion pictures, the best known example being Georges Méliès’s *A Trip to the Moon* (1902); Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1926) is generally considered one of the classics of the silent movie era. Outside of movie serials featuring heroes such as Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers, however, science fiction films did not become common until after World War II. Through most of the 50s and 60s the genre was dominated by B movies featuring rocketships, robots, and bug-eyed monsters, while science fiction on television largely followed the example of the film genre. Science fiction cinema did not receive much critical attention in the United States until 1968, with the release of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, followed, in 1971, by his *A Clockwork Orange*. Respectability was followed by commercial
success with the release, in 1977, of Close Encounters of the Third Kind and Star Wars. Since then, science fiction in Hollywood has become all but synonymous with special effects blockbuster, and the profitability of these films is taken quite seriously. On television, it was not until a decade after Star Wars, with the premiere of Star Trek: The Next Generation in 1987, that the science fiction genre was considered anything other than a losing proposition. On cable, the Sci-Fi Channel was launched in 1992, changing its name to Syfy in 2009. The genre has been quite naturally been popular in various forms of new media ever since computers were used to do something other than number crunching.

Since the 1980s, scholars have also begun to pay increasingly more attention to the science fiction genre as a form of popular culture. In particular, postmodernists, cultural theorists, and media ecologists have recognized science fiction’s unique concern with the problems of modern, technological society such as dehumanization, and the genre’s ability to speak to larger social and global concerns, and to grapple with questions of identity, the self, and subjectivity through the encounter with otherness in the form of aliens and machines.

This course places significant emphasis on science fiction film as opposed to other media because it is through the motion picture that the genre has found its widest audience. We will, however, also consider the genre as it occurs across different media, including film adaptations of written works, books, plays, magazines, comic books, television, cable, popular music, videogames, computer software, and websites. It is important to emphasize that this course involves a significant amount of reading and writing. Even when the object of our study is film or some other audiovisual medium, one of our main tasks is to “translate” the audiovisual form into a verbal form, and to provide detailed criticism and analysis.

For those of you who come to this course as science fiction fans, let me note that while it is wonderful to be able to study something that you really care about, and while having a great deal of background knowledge of the subject can be very helpful, you will not be successful if you approach the subject matter as a fan. You will need to develop a certain amount of critical distance from the material in order to engage in analysis, and to analyze your own reactions as a fan. And for those of you who don’t know much about science fiction, don’t worry. As outsiders, you are in a good position to criticize and analyze science fiction, and the readings and class discussions will provide you with all of the information you need to do well in this class. A further note on gender would be in order: Historically, science fiction was a male-oriented genre, but the genre has been changing in recent decades, in regard to creators, characters, and critics, and analysis of the genre in regard to gender and sexuality represents a significant portion of scholarly work on the genre.

Finally, please note that in choosing the books and films for this class, I have tried to represent different historical periods, themes, trends, etc., and to match the materials to various methods of analysis and criticism. If your favorite movie, book, program, etc., was not included, you can
still deal with it in your papers.