

ENGL 393-01/480-01: Science Fiction Films
T Th 10:00 a.m. –12:05 p.m.
Admin. 202
Winter 2009

Dr. Sean McDowell
Office: Casey 511
Phone: (206) 296–6125
Office Hours: T 12:15-1:15
or by appointment
Email: mcdowell@seattleu.edu

SCIENCE FICTION FILMS

DESCRIPTION

In an era when we are capable of destroying all life on earth in a single day of nuclear strikes, or over several decades through the reckless destruction of our environment, no other film genre addresses the subject of our future as fully as science fiction. In addition to spurring many technological innovations in moviemaking throughout its history, science fiction films traditionally have undertaken serious philosophical exploration and social, cultural, and ideological critique. They often address, implicitly or explicitly, our assumptions, our values, our aspirations, and our fears. Moreover, because they speak directly to their times, they serve as a useful barometer for how people viewed themselves and their world at the time they were created. This course introduces the SF film genre, its methods of inquiry, its notable experiments, and through a series of interdisciplinary readings and an eclectic selection of films, the stakes in our imaginative visions of our future.

480 Core Interdisciplinary Course: Roughly half of the students in this class are taking it as a 480 Core Interdisciplinary course. Like Senior Synthesis, its fellow University Core capstone experience, the 480 Core Interdisciplinary course is best thought of as a “putting-it-together” exercise because it asks students to combine the approaches of multiple disciplines in addressing a pressing contemporary problem. In this case, the question at hand is fairly obvious: What is the relationship between our artistic renderings of the future and the choices we make to define our actual future? The stakes behind this question are high, especially during these early years of what religious writer Thomas Parry has described as a new age of history—the “ecozoic age,” in which the greatest threat to our existence and that of all earthly life is us. The history of science fiction, both its literary and film manifestations, has engaged in thinking about the adverse effects of human beings on the environment. Even in stories not expressly about these subjects, we find extrapolations about where we will end up if we continue on our present course. Studying these stories, then, can be eye-opening because they raise matters that all-too-often reside outside of our daily consciousness. To fuel our discussions of the films and the issues they raise, we will draw on ideas from films studies, literary studies, world history, philosophy, psychology, and the hard sciences—a wide range of disciplines that together will illuminate our subject in ways no single discipline by itself could. This interdisciplinary focus will enrich our understanding of science fiction, films, and SF films.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the course you should be able to:

- ∞ describe the evolution of SF films from the 1950s to the early 2000s, in terms of general themes, production values, and overall outlook;
- ∞ speak intelligibly about how the visual and the aural elements of a film contribute to its conveyance of ideas;
- ∞ explain the ways in which SF films encapsulate cultural anxieties and aspirations at the time they were produced;
- ∞ explain the presence and influence of historical context and of philosophical and psychological ideas in SF films
- ∞ understand and discuss the processes of “estrangement” and “extrapolation” as two distinct methods of analysis within SF.

Your Goals for the Course: Making films is a collaborative process, involving many people, from the writer to the director to the actors, on down to the people who order food for the crew. Making a good course also is a collaborative venture, in that it requires the participation of all involved. You have seen my course objectives and goals—aspirations, if you will. What are yours? Read the syllabus all the way through and then in the spaces below, write your own goals. We will discuss them during the second class session.

∞

∞

∞

FILM SELECTION

As you can imagine, and as the partial listing of films in John Scalzi’s guide attests, the SF film genre includes a broad variety of films, varying greatly in scope, subject, production values, and overall quality. I have selected films according to four general criteria: 1) their quality (and in some cases their popularity) as successful films; 2) their ability to exemplify important characteristics of their times; 3) their ability to speak to each other *across* time (SF is a highly allusive and intertextual genre); and 4) their suitability for illustrating or addressing the main questions within the genre. In addition, I tend to privilege the work of significant directors within the genre (Stanley Kubrick, George Lucas, Stephen Spielberg, Ridley Scott, and James Cameron) for the benefit of those students interested more generally in the great directors of film. No doubt many of the films in this syllabus are not new to you. But their juxtaposition with each other, our contextual readings, our conversations, and

our close analysis of films as artistic constructions intended to elicit in viewers specific reactions should give you new insights even into films already familiar to you. Finally, if I have slighted your favorite film by not including it here, my apologies. Its absence most likely doesn't result from my neglect so much as from a need to edit to fit. My initial list of films for this course was easily twice as long—and as a result, highly unrealistic. In the end, I had to slight some of my favorites, too, so I share your pain.

Course Films: *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *War of the Worlds* (1953 & 2005), *Forbidden Planet* (1956), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Star Wars* (1977), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Terminator* (1984), *Total Recall* (1990), and *WALL-E* (2008).

Case Study Films: *I, Robot* (Alex Proyas, 2004); *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000); and *V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue, 2006). *I will treat the case study assignment in more detail in a separate packet.*

REQUIREMENTS

When you read the schedule below, you will notice that the proportion of readings to films shifts slightly as the course progresses. I require more out-of-class readings in the first half, and in the second the reading load lightens both to accommodate the six films therein and also to give you time to pursue your own research for your case study project. In the first half (the 1950s to the 1970s), I assume the films are less familiar to you; as a result, they require more contextual recovery. Also, in the first half, we must discuss definitions—of science fiction, of film as an art form, of contextual study. By the second half, our close scrutiny of the art and content of SF films during the first weeks will model for you the methodology you will follow in the second half. The assignments in both halves assume this progression from definitions and skill-building to more independent interpretation and argumentation.

For every session, you are required to do *all* of the reading, as assigned. For some days, this will be quite easy; but for other days (those during which we will discuss Wells' *War of the Worlds*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations*), it will require careful planning. In the schedule below, I have indicated which sessions in particular will require advance reading (see my comments). During the first three weeks especially, we will have quite a bit of reading. Then, as we concentrate more on writing assignments, the reading will lessen in quantity. For *every* session, I expect you to come prepared. Indeed, the fun happens only if you're adequately prepared.

I. PARTICIPATION

The preceding paragraph segues naturally into class participation. I anticipate a pleasant, engaging series of lively discussions throughout this course. Given how fast the course filled and became oversubscribed, many of you are here because you want to be, no small gift to me. Those of you who have taken my classes know that I value stimulating in-class discussions. I consider students' active engagement in class discussions an important part of the learning process. For me, participation, often considered a vague, squishy category, is fairly specific and well-defined: good participation means more than simply functioning as a warm, metabolizing body in a chair; it means a commitment to the conversations we create, and a willingness to become part of those conversations. I recognize that people have different comfort levels in regard to class discussion. Some people like to voice their opinions and ideas on a daily basis, while others prefer to actively

listen and contribute more occasionally. Regardless of individual comfort levels, however, I expect everyone to come to each session prepared to discuss the reading and/or film at hand. Everyone needn't speak all the time; but I expect you to *share* your ideas when you have them—and I trust everyone will have them—and I expect you to volunteer for the less intimidating components of classroom discussions (e.g., reading a passage aloud or volunteering factual information when prompted to do so). At the end of the quarter, I will ask you to submit a **two-page assessment** of your role as a participant in the seminar. I will weigh this assessment along with my perception of your in-class participation.

II. EXTRAPOLATION ESSAY

In one of his early essays, Robert Heinlein helped to popularize the term “**extrapolation**” as a way of explaining the creative process of SF writers. While writers of mainstream realism concentrate on creating as realistic a portrayal of the real world as possible, many SF writers begin by examining real-world characteristics, trends, and attitudes and then speculate about where they might lead. Like mathematicians, they **extrapolate** the values of possible future variables, based on their thinking about current, known variables. Not every SF story operates in this fashion, but many do. SF filmmakers also **extrapolate** from the present in order to construct their future visions.

For your first paper, due by noon on Friday, 30 January (see schedule), I will ask you analyze an extrapolated technology or an extrapolated trend *that we have not addressed in class* from either *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *War of the Worlds*, *Forbidden Planet*, or *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Your task will be 1) to discuss how the filmmakers have extrapolated the technology or the trend; 2) explain how it alters our way of life, our identity, and/or our future; and 3) assess what the extrapolation may reveal to us about the current condition(s) it builds on. The nature of this process will become clearer to you as we discuss the films in our first unit and as we unpack **extrapolation** as a mode of future-making. For now, though, think of this first essay assignment as an initiation into the creative process of SF visionaries.

III. CASE STUDY PROJECT

The main writing project of the course, due by noon on Monday, 9 March (see schedule), asks you to engage in a substantial exploration of a case study I will provide. You will have three case studies to choose from, each centered on a different SF film *that we haven't analyzed in class*. Each case study will establish the question at hand, provide you with some important background, and give you guidelines for how to proceed.

Case study one (“The Greatest SF Film Never Made?”) asks you to explore the story of Harlan Ellison’s never produced screenplay of Isaac Asimov’s pivotal short story collection, *I, Robot* (1950). Using *Citizen Kane* as a model, Ellison managed to convert successfully Asimov’s iconic (yet episodic) stories into a rich screenplay that several prominent directors, at one time or another, wished to shoot. Yet that film was never made. More than twenty years later, 20th Century Fox, which acquired the rights to the short story collection (while Warner Brothers still owned the rights to the screenplay), made another *I, Robot* instead, featuring Will Smith in a plot that plays fast and loose with Asimov’s vision. Meanwhile, Ellison’s screenplay exists as a published book with wonderful illustrations by Mark Zug. This case study asks you to determine whether Ellison’s script truly is the greatest SF film never made, as some people have claimed. This case study will fascinate

those interested in the relationships between literary fiction and film and in the process of film adaptation.

Case study two (“The Insightfulness of a Name?”) asks you to address the presentation of women in Bryan Singer’s highly successful film, *X-Men* (2000), the first film in one of the most popular comic book movie trilogies to-date. You will notice throughout the course that the vast majority of SF films feature men as heroes of one kind or another and tend to relegate women to supporting roles. In *X-Men*, women appear to have more power (or power_s) than they do elsewhere and as a result more agency and greater claims to heroic status. Yet the film (and the comic book universe upon which it is based) is called *X-Men* (my emphasis). Is this name more insightful than it first appears? Are the women in this film authentic heroes speaking to the concerns of women, or are they merely projections of male expectations, assumptions, and fantasies? To what extent are these two possibilities mutually exclusive in the SF film genre? The representations of women in *X-Men* and the questions they raise are deceptively complicated, as a close scrutiny of the film demonstrates. Yet you have the chance to sort them out as part of this case study.

Case study three (“The Justice of a Legend’s Disgruntlement?”) asks you to dive into a legend’s disgruntlement with films based on his work. British writer Alan Moore is arguably the most influential comic book writer and graphic novelist of the last twenty-five years. His *Watchmen* (1986-87) was a prime mover in the trend to treat comics as a medium for addressing adult themes, and his other works, both within established comics universes and outside of them, have cemented his reputation as one of the most serious and important graphic novelists in the history of the field. Hollywood has been infatuated with Moore’s fertile imagination. In fact, to date, six Hollywood films have adapted or are adapting Moore’s material (*The Return of Swamp Thing* [1989], *From Hell* [2001], *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* [2003], *Constantine* [2005], *V for Vendetta* [2006], and the forthcoming *Watchmen* [2009]). Yet Moore has tremendous disdain for these productions and for Hollywood generally and has disassociated himself from these projects as well as any film adaptations of his work. He won’t even watch them, much less allow studios to trade on his name. In most cases, these films haven’t done well with critics or with the public at large. Yet *V for Vendetta* (directed by James McTeigue from a screenplay by the Wachowski brothers of *The Matrix* fame) is a notable exception. The film grossed more than \$130 million worldwide, and some critics have considered it visually rich and politically important. Still, Moore considers it a travesty of his novel. Did McTeigue et. al. screw up Moore’s story? Is Moore overreacting? Or is this a case of competing aesthetic value systems, one literary, the other filmic? You decide during this case study.

IV. MIDTERM AND FINAL EXAMS

Finally, we will have two examinations in this course, one midterm (worth 20 percent) and a final (worth 20 percent). The purpose of these exams will be to gauge how well you are able to understand how filmmakers employ the elements of film to further their artistic intentions, the depth of your comprehension of the issues we’ve raised in class, the complexity of your knowledge of the dominant themes and conventions of the SF film genre, and your ability to read SF films rhetorically. While I am still debating the format of these exams, you can be sure they will combine several different kinds of items, ranging from objective questions to identifications to short essays. The midterm will cover the 1950s to the 1970s and the final will cover the 1970s to the 2000s. Neither exam will encompass the entire course by itself, though I take for granted that important

concepts from the first half carry through until the end. You can be sure we will discuss the exams at greater length in class.

Summary of Course Grade:

Participation	15 percent
Extrapolation Essay	15 percent
Midterm Exam	20 percent
Case Study	30 percent
Final Exam	<u>20 percent</u>
	100 percent

POLICIES

DISABILITIES

The Dean’s Council has requested that this paragraph be included in all syllabi: If you have, or think you may have, a disability (including an ‘invisible disability’ such as a learning disability, a chronic health problem, or a mental health problem) that interferes with your performance as a student in this class, you are encouraged to arrange support services and/or accommodations through Disabilities Services staff in the Learning Center, Loyola 100, (206) 296-5470. Disability-based adjustments to course expectations can be arranged only through this process.

TARDINESS

When you are supposed to show up for work, your employer expects you to be on time. When you make a date, your date expects you to be on time. I’m neither your employer nor your date, but I expect you to extend to me and to your peers the same courtesy. I plan to start class on time, and I expect you to be there on time. Tardiness should never develop into a pattern. Remember how annoying it is when someone walks in late to a movie at the cinema. On more than few days, this is exactly what you might be doing if you are late.

LATE WRITTEN WORK

If you make no *prior* arrangements (note the emphasis on *prior*) with me to the contrary, any written assignment not handed in on the day it is due will be docked one third of a letter grade for *every day* late (e.g., three days late means minus one letter grade). Finally, any instance of plagiarism—the unacknowledged use of someone else’s written materials as one’s own—will result in a failing grade for the assignment at the bare minimum. *If a person plagiarizes all or part of the case study assignment, the failing grade will result in failing the course.* I will adhere to the academic honesty policies outlined in <http://www.seattleu.edu/registrar/page.aspx?ID=87>. If you are unsure about what constitutes plagiarism, I urge you to speak with me as soon as possible.

CONTACTING ME

Because I am well aware possible schedules conflicts, I have scheduled one afternoon of regular office hours (T 12:15–1:15); but I would be happy to meet with you at other times by appointment. Indeed, I schedule only one “official” office hour because I realize how difficult it is to arrange times

that would be free for everyone. I often place a sign-up sheet outside my office door to indicate my availability, especially during busy weeks. The best way to reach me is via email, which I check regularly. The second best way to reach me is via my office phone (see above), which is connected to voice mail. I look forward to discussing with you the course and your work and participation.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS, VIEWINGS, AND ASSIGNMENTS

Required Texts (in order of reading):

John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (completed before the first day)
John Scalzi, *The Rough Guide to Sci-Fi Movies*
H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds*
William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*
Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*
Philip K. Dick, *The Philip K. Dick Reader*

I will make additional readings available through our Angel website, either in the form of .pdfs or through links.

Notes:

- 1) Each reading and each film showing must be completed *before* the day of class during which it is scheduled for discussion.
- 2) Because this is a film studies course, we are *reading* films, which means your work for the course may feel much different from that of other courses. Be sure to watch each film *at least twice prior to* our discussions. Simply watching again a film you saw years ago will not work; you will miss many details unless you watch the films twice in quicker succession.
- 3) Finally, I reserve the right to make changes to the schedule below. Indeed, I can foresee some changes in the near future because my wife and I are expecting our third child any day now. Be prepared for a guest speaker or two and some minor adjustments in the batting order during these first few weeks.

INTRODUCTIONS

T 1/6 Defining SF and SF Films. The Art of Film. *A Trip to the Moon* (Georges Melies, 1902).
Review John Hersey, *Hiroshima*

IN THE SHADOWS OF COLD WAR

(The 1950s)

W 1/7 Film Screening of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951)—7:00 – 9:30

p.m. in Pigott 107

- Th 1/8 **SF Film Master Theme 1: What do we fear (or aspire to)?**
Read: John Scalzi, “Introduction” and “Science Fiction Literature” (1–25) and Harry Bates, “Farewell to the Master,” the primary SF source for the first *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (link on Angel)
The Day the Earth Stood Still (Robert Wise, 1951). Also read Scalzi’s account of the film (78ff)
-
- M 1/12 **Film Screening of *War of the Worlds* (Byron Haskin, 1953) —7:00 – 9:30 p.m. in Pigott 107**
- T 1/13 **The Classic Invasion Story.** Read: H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (entire)
- Th 1/15 Read: Scalzi, “A Warp-Speed Tour of Sci-Fi Film” (25–48), and his account of *The War of the Worlds* (145ff)
War of the Worlds (Byron Haskin, 1953)
-
- M 1/19 **Film Screening of *Forbidden Planet* (Fred M. Wilcox, 1956) —7:00 – 9:30 p.m. in Pigott 107**
- T 1/20 **SF Film Master Theme 2: Who are we?**
Read: William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (entire); also, Isaac Asimov, “Runaround” (link on Angel)
Forbidden Planet (Fred M. Wilcox, 1956)
- Th 1/22 **“Monsters from the ID.” *Forbidden Planet* (cont’d).** Read: “Freud’s Structural and Topographical Models of Personality” (link on Angel) and “Id, ego, and super-ego” (link on Angel) and Scalzi’s account of the film (88ff)
-

FILMS OF IDEAS

(The 1960s)

-
- M 1/26 **Film Screening of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) —7:00 – 9:30 p.m. in Pigott 107**
- T 1/27 **A New Era in the Art of the SF Film.** *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968). Read Scalzi’s account of the film (140ff)
-

UNEXPLORED FRONTIERS

(The 1970s)

-
- W 1/28 **Film Screening of *Star Wars: A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977)—7:00 – 9:30 p.m., place TBA**

Th 1/29 **The Hero Myth.** Read: Joseph Campbell, “The Hero and The God” (Angel) and “The Keys” (Angel), and Scalzi’s account of *Star Wars: A New Hope* (118ff)
Star Wars: A New Hope (George Lucas, 1977)

F 1/30 **EXTRAPOLATION ESSAY** due by noon. Submit your essay in electronic form (converted to Word or .rtf format) to the drop box in the Angel site.

T 2/3 *Star Wars*, cont’d. Read Scalzi, “The Science: Theories that Fuel Sci-Fi” (203-18)

Th 2/5 **MIDTERM EXAM**

M 2/9 **Film Screening of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977)—7:00 – 9:30 p.m. in Pigott 107**

T 2/10 *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977). Read Scalzi’s account of the film (73ff)

CYBORGS, SIMULATIONS, AND BLEAK FUTURES

(The 1980s)

Th 2/12 **Replicants and Simulacra.** Read: Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations* (entire). *This text might well be the most difficult of the course. Budget plenty of time to read (and re-read) it.
Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982)

M 2/16 **Film Screening of *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) —7:00 – 9:30 p.m. in Pigott 107.**

T 2/17 *Blade Runner*, cont’d. Read Scalzi’s account of the film (64ff)

Th 2/19 No class—catch up reading/viewing day. The next three weeks will be film intensive. Be sure to budget enough quality to time study each film.

M 2/23 **Film Screening of *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) —7:00 – 9:30 p.m. in Pigott 107**

T 2/24 **Revenge Effects.** Read Philip K. Dick, “Second Variety”
The Terminator (James Cameron, 1984)

WE DECIDE

(The 1990s)

W 2/25 **Film Screening of *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990) —7:00 – 9:30 p.m. in Pigott 107**

Th 2/26 **Simulations.** Read: Philip K. Dick, “We Can Remember It For You, Wholesale”
Total Recall (Paul Verhoeven, 1990)

THE WORLD FALLING APART?

(The 2000s)

M 3/2 **Film screening of *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005) —7:00 – 9:30 p.m. in Pigott 107**

T 3/3 *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005)

Th 3/5 No class—catch up reading/viewing day

M 3/9 **CASE STUDY** due by noon. Submit your essay in electronic form (converted to Word or .rtf format) to the drop box in the Angel site.

Film screening of *WALL-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008) —7:00 – 9:30 p.m. in Pigott 107

T 3/10 *War of the Worlds* (cont’d); *WALL-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008)

Th 3/12 *WALL-E* (cont’d)

T 3/17 FINAL EXAM 8:00 – 9:50 a.m. in our usual classroom.
