

**Science Fiction Film**  
**Lecture/discussion: MW 11:30-12:50**  
**Screenings: M 4:00-7:00 pm**

**Instructor:** Roberta Buiani

**Fall 2008**

**Office:** 4-127 Woods

**Phone:** 884-0710, ext. 4350

**E-mail:** [robb@yorku.ca](mailto:robb@yorku.ca)

**Course Journal:** <http://scifi254.wordpress.com/>

**Office Hours:** Wed. 2:00-3:30

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### **Course Description**

Science Fiction film equally plays a major role in forming our collective imaginary regarding potential futures or unexplored worlds, and in exposing/interrogating our deeply-rooted fears (and irresistible curiosity) of alien invasions, environmental destruction and disease. Hidden underneath layers of “pure entertainment” brought to us by spectacular CGI effects and action-packed scenes, are reflections on, and critiques of, our social customs and taboos.

In Science Fiction film, the above-mentioned fears often materialize through the figure the “Other.” Broadly identified as that which doesn’t belong, the unfamiliar, the outsider, the “Other” comes in the form of a menace from outer space (monstrous creatures or unknown substances ruthlessly attacking the innocent human species, the ghost or the supernatural). It manifests through unknown, uncanny, or unusual space/place (the outer space, the post-apocalyptic, the ultra-technological, or bureaucracy-dominated city of the future). It emerges, unexpectedly, as a consequence of, or from within everyday practices (the freak, the hybrid, the mutant or the robot).

As an omnipresent theme, the “Other” seeps through all aspects of cinematography, mise-en-scène etc... Thus, in this course, the “Other” is used as a starting point that will guide us in the exploration of the complexities of the genre of science fiction film.

### **Course Objectives**

To explore, identify and thoroughly analyze the specificity and the major characteristics of Science Fiction Film.

To adequately use critical skills in examining a genre using a given theme.

To learn how to equally arrange and evaluate the dissimilar aspects composing this genre (material, technical and content-wise) through a critical comparative approach.

To understand a relationship between the features that compose film as a material medium and the cultural/social connotations it communicates.

To practice constructive criticism in a mature and active interaction and dialogue in a group environment and on the web.

### **Required Texts:**

- FS 254 Science Fiction Film Course Pack

- Bordwell and Thompson’s *Film History* as a general reference (if you don’t own a copy you can

easily find one at the library).

- Additional material, references and reviews will be assigned each week. Use the week-by-week outline below and the web (<http://scifi254.wordpress.com/>) for directions and more information.

**Optional Material:**

Optional (but important!) material can be found on the website (see above). Note, it is also your responsibility to submit material to this web journal and to the class. Use this material as additional aid for your final paper/project or just as a general reference.

**Assignments & Value, Dates Due**

1) PARTICIPATION 15%

*(Ongoing, starting from week 2)*

I assume that you are taking this course because you are sincerely interested in Science Fiction! Lectures are important, but, in the end, everybody should contribute to make this class an enriching experience (and not just a boring accumulation of information). Participation IS CRUCIAL and goes beyond sitting in class. I realize that different students are comfortable with different forms of communication. Said that, I expect you to choose one (or more) of the following ways to actively engage with the material and with your classmates.

WHAT?	HOW?
In class participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Ask (and answer) questions. Each week I will collect and pose questions originating from the readings and/or from the films. Feel free to answer in a written form (if you choose this format, contextualize your intervention with reference to texts and other reliable sources)</li> <li>b) Propose alternative readings/screenings</li> <li>c) Bring magazines, books, images etc..</li> </ul>
Web participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Write reviews on the screenings and comments on readings</li> <li>b) Submit links and pertinent material</li> <li>c) Start a discussion or reply to threads posted by the instructor and by your peers</li> </ul>
Other creative ways	Do you think the class should pay attention to a particular piece of music, a theatre drama or exhibition? Feel free to propose (ask me before you do so)

NOTE: I expect you to contribute in one way or another on a regular basis (once a week would be great).

2) GROUP ASSIGNMENT 20 %

*(Ongoing, starting from week 4)*

- Groups should have no more than 5-6 people.
- Using the readings as starting point, discuss and review one of the films screened in class.
- Draw a comparison between said film and another film of your choice (one that has not been screened in class).
- A short group presentation (max. 20 min.) and a short (750-1000 words) written review should be collectively produced.

Guidelines, research questions and sign-up sheet will be distributed in class and posted online during Week 2

3) IN-CLASS WRITTEN TEST 20%

*(Week 7- Oct. 22)*

Essay questions based on the readings and the discussion so far.

Guidelines during Week 6

4) RESEARCH PAPER OR PROJECT PROPOSAL 15%

*(Due on or before Week 10- Nov. 10 max 1000 words)*

Whether this is a project or a essay proposal, the assignment has to be considered a **formal** document. Write your proposal convincingly, as if you were presenting a grant proposal to some major institutions (Whether you are in Film Studies, English, or Communication, you should start becoming familiar with this process as you might well go through this when you graduate). At this stage, you don't need to know exactly what your project or paper will be about, but try to be as precise as possible.

I will circulate a list of general topics and films. Choose one topic and one film.. It is up to you to decide your essay/project question and thesis. Be clear about the format and the medium you would like to use to deliver your final project.

*NOTE! If you think that doing a project as opposed to an essay might save you time and exonerate you from engaging with the readings, think twice! Doing a project is a lot of work, it requires commitment and study. I would not recommend it to anybody. Should you decide to do a project, schedule an appointment and let's discuss it.*

*Samples and guidelines to be circulated well-ahead of time.*

5) RESEARCH PAPER OR PROJECT 30%

Due on Dec. 1. This is last day of class. Don't miss it!!

*See above! Discuss possible formats and media used with me before you decide what to do.*

**Assignment and Communication General Policy**

Make sure your assignments are in by the deadlines (very clearly stated). Late assignments are subject to a 10% penalty per day.

Extensions will be granted only upon presentation of doctor's note or pertinent piece of document.

My Office hours, email and extension are all in this document. Coming to my office is by far the best and most reliable way to reach me. Emails magically get lost. If you really have to send me an email, indicate in the subject line the course (FS 254). Remember to sign your e-mail. Don't expect me to reply immediately. Allow at least 48 hours. E-mail is not for emergency. Chances are, you will see me before I read your e-mail. Don't send me anything the day before an assignment is due or before a test.

## Weekly Readings

### INTRODUCTION

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#### Week 1 - Sept. 8 –10, 2008

Screenings Excerpts from:

- George Méliès, *Le Voyage Dans la Lune*, 1904
- Iakov Protazanov , *Aelita*, 1924
- Fritz Lang, *Metropolis*, 1927

Readings:

Méliès, G. (1907). Trick Effects. In G. Rickman (Ed.), *The Science Fiction Film Reader* (pp. 2-4). New York: Proscenium.

Bunuel, L. (1927). Metropolis. In G. Rickman (Ed.), *The Science Fiction Film Reader* (pp. 13-15). New York: Proscenium.

Sobchack, V. (2004). Images of Wonder: The Look of Science Fiction. In S. Redmond (Ed.), *Liquid Metal: the Science Fiction Film Reader* (pp. 4-10): Wallflower press

### THEY CAME FROM OUTER SPACE: THE EXTRATERRESTRIAL OTHER

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#### Week 2 - Sept 15 –17, 2008

Screening:

- Robert Wise, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, 1951

Readings:

Cranny-Francis, A. (2007). Mapping Cultural Auracy: the Sonic Politics of The Day the Earth Stood Still. *Social semiotics*, 17(1), 87-110

Wierzbicki, j. (2002). Weird Vibrations: How the Theremin Gave Musical Voice to Hollywood Extraterrestrial "Others". *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 30(3), 125-135

#### Week 3 - Sept. 22 – 24, 2008

Screening:

- Tim Burton, *Mars Attacks!*, (1996)

Readings:

Hendershot, C. (1998). The Invaded Body,: Paranoia and Radiation Anxiety in Invaders from Mars, It Came from Outer Space, and Invasion of the Body Snatchers. *Extrapolation*, 39(1)

Murray, C. S. (2006). Space Oddities. *New Statesman (1996)*, 135(4789), 34(32)-36

MEN AND COMPUTERS, OR, THE SELF AND THE MACHINIC OTHER

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**Week 4 - Sept. 29 – Oct. 1, 2008**

Screening:

- John Badham, *War Games* (1983)

Sontag, S. (1965, October). The Imagination of Disaster.

*Commentary*.<http://www.commentarymagazine.com/searcharchive.cfm?year=1965>

Matheson, T. J. (1992). Marcuse, Ellul, and the Science-Fiction Film: Negative Responses to Technology. *Science - Fiction Studies*, 19, 326

**Week 5 - Oct. 6 – 8, 2008**

Screening:

- Stanley Kubrick, *2001 Space Odissey* (1968)

Readings:

Stern, M. (1980). Making Culture into Nature; or, Who Put the “Special” into “Special Effects”? *Science - Fiction Studies*, 7, 263-269

Larson, J. (2008). Limited Imagination: Depictions of Computers in Science Fiction Film. *Futures (London, England)*, 40(3), 293-299

DYSTOPIAN EXTRAPOLATIONS: BEYOND TIME AND SPACE

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**Week 6 - Oct 13 – 15, 2008**

**Oct. 13** THANKSGIVING, NO CLASSES

**Oct 15**

Screening:

- Chris Marker, *La Jetee* (1963)

Readings:

Atkinson, P. (2007). The Visualization of Utopia in Recent Science Fiction Film. *Colloquy: Text Theory Critique*, 14, (16 pages)

Friedlander, E., & Dolfen, D. (2001). 'La Jetee': Regarding the Gaze. *Boundary 2*, 28(1), 75(16)-91

**Week 7 - Oct. 20 – 22, 2008**

Screening:

- Terry Gilliam, *Brazil* (1985)

Readings:

Hamel, K. (1998). Modernity and Mise-en-Scene: Terry Gilliam and *Brazil*. In G. Rickman (Ed.), *The Science Fiction Film Reader* (pp. 344-354). New York: Proscenium.

**OCTOBER 22. TEST**

**ROBOTS, REPLICANTS AND MUTANTS: THE OTHER AMONG US**

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**Week 8 - Oct. 27 – 29, 2008**

Screening:

Steven Spielberg, *AI, Artificial Intelligence* (2001)

Readings:

Abbott, S. (2006). Final Frontiers: Computer-Generated Imagery and the Science Fiction Film. *Science - Fiction Studies*, 33(1), 89-107

Pierson, M. (2001). No Longer State-of-the-Art: Crafting a Future for CGI. *Wide Angle*, 21(1), 29-47

**Week 9 - Nov. 3 – 5, 2008**

Screening:

TBA

Readings:

Hanna, M., & Carey, M. (2004). Ambient Soundscapes in Blade Runner. In P. Hayward (Ed.), *Off the Planet: Music, Sound and Science Fiction Cinema* (pp. 149-164). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

**Week 10 - Nov. 10- 12, 2008**

Screening:

- Mamoru Oshii, *Ghost in the Shell* (1995)

Readings:

Curti, G. H. (2008). The Ghost in the City and a Landscape of Life: a Reading of Difference in Shirow and Oshii's Ghost in the Shell. *Environment and planning D*, 26(1), 87-106

Yuen, W. K. (2000). ON THE EDGE OF SPACES: 'Blade Runner,' 'Ghost in the Shell,' and Hong Kong's cityscape. *Science Fiction Studies*, 27(1), 1(21)-22

**PAPER OR PROJECT PROPOSAL DUE**

**FLESH AND GENES: THE OTHER WITHIN AND AMONG US**

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**Week 11 - Nov. 17- 19, 2008**

Screening:

- Andrew Niccoll, *Gattaca* (1997)

Readings:

Kirby, d. A. (2000). The new Eugenics in Cinema: genetic Determinism and Gene Therapy in GATTACA. *Science Fiction Studies*, 27(1), 193-215

Nama, A. (2008). Bad Blood: Fear of Racial Contamination. In *Black Space. Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* (pp. 10-41). Austin: University of Texas.

**Week 12 - Nov. 24 –27, 2008**

Screening:

- David Cronenberg, *Videodrome* (1983). Readings: TBA

**Week 13 – Dec. 1 Thanksgiving Make up Day**

Wrap up class.

**PROJECTS AND PAPERS DUE!**

***Accessible Learning***

Students with disabilities or special needs are advised to contact Laurier=s Accessible Learning Office for information regarding its services and resources. Students are encouraged to review the Calendar for information regarding all services available on campus.

***Academic Misconduct***

Wilfrid Laurier University uses software that can check for plagiarism, Turnitin.com. Students may be required to submit their written work in electronic form and have it checked for plagiarism.



***FOOT Patrol***

AAfter evening classes call 886-FOOT for a walk or drive home - No Walk is Too Short or Too Long!!!@