

SCIENCE FICTION



COURSE CONTENT:

This unit examines issues of individual and societal identity and explores cultural responses to science through analysis of science fiction moving-image media (TV, film, video games). Screenings and case studies are drawn from across the history of the genre and a variety of national and cultural contexts. The science fiction unit critiques the genre via key theoretical texts and close textual analysis of science fiction's central themes and oft-mercurial iconography.

Key themes: technology and human identity, memory, time and time travel, artificial intelligence, extra-terrestrials, genetic engineering, reality/virtual reality/alternative realities, fandom.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

On successful completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Differentiate the main issues, iconography and themes in science fiction
2. Identify and connect the main issues in SF to their socio-cultural and historical context
3. Evaluate critical, theoretical, and philosophical ideas in analysis of the main themes and issues of the science fiction genre
4. Use appropriate theoretical and critical frameworks to write original work to an accepted academic standard using a recognised referencing system

ESSAY QUESTIONS:

You **must** refer to **appropriate critical theory** and **at least two science fiction texts** to illustrate your argument. Please ensure that your essay includes detailed analysis of your media texts rather than simply making general statements about the genre.

How is the urban landscape used as metaphor in science fiction cinema?

Discuss two of the following issues - nationalism, postcolonialism, gender, race – in relation to the representation of aliens in science fiction.

How does artificial intelligence conform to and/or challenge notions of what it is to be human?

“I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (Haraway). Discuss in relation to gender and identity.

How do virtual/alternative reality narratives challenge the relationships between the mind, body, and memory?

“In high-tech cultures, the boundaries that construct the human... have been disrupted and are no longer tenable” (Shapiro, 2014). Discuss.

In what ways does science fiction critique surveillance societies?

Genres “are always historically relative and therefore historically specific” (Neale, 1995). Discuss.

To what extent is science fiction not about the future of science and technology?

“The relationship between science and science fiction (SF) is both self-evident and extremely complex” (Vint, 2014) Discuss.

Is science fiction about the past, the present, *or* the future?

You can propose your own essay question, but this **MUST** be agreed with the unit leader prior to submission. **An unapproved question will receive a fail.**

SCHEME OF WORK:

READING: Students are expected to complete the reading for each week so that they can fully participate in class discussion in line with the [MMU Student Commitment](#). Seminars will include discussion of the screened film, the texts in the reading list, further viewing, and other relevant texts covered in independent study.

VIEWING: Films will be screened every week as part of the unit – if you miss the screening you must plan to see the film independently. Students will be provided with a list of further viewing for each week that should form a base for exploring the genre/subgenre/theme under discussion in class. There is a large science fiction collection at the library which you can check out.

Please check the [Moodle](#) for up to date information and links to the reading where possible.



Week One

Lecture: Science Fiction and the Science Fiction Imagination

Screening: *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927)

Seminar: Introduction and discussion of definitions of the SF genre. Why is SF considered to be so difficult to define? How has science fiction changed across the history Western of cinema? Is science fiction about science? Is SF about the future? Can SF predict the future?

Reading:

Vivian Sobchack, 'Images of Wonder: The Look of Science Fiction', In Sean Redmond, ed., 2004. *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*. London: Wallflower Press, pp.4-10.

Annette Kuhn, 'Introduction: Cultural Theory and Science Fiction Cinema,' in Kuhn (ed.), *Alien Zone* (London: Verso, 1990), pp.1-14.

Julie Wosk, 'Metropolis,' *Technology and Culture* 51(2), 2010: 403-408.

Further reading:

Susan Sontag, 'The Imagination of Disaster'. In: Sean Redmond, ed., 2004. *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*. London: Wallflower Press, pp. 40-47.

'Introduction', In: Mark Bould, Andrew Butler, Adam Roberts, and Sherryl Vint, eds., 2009. *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*. London: Routledge.

Sherryl Vint, 'Science Studies', In: Mark Bould, Andrew Butler, Adam Roberts, and Sherryl Vint, eds., 2009. *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*. London: Routledge Chapter 41.

Week Two

Lecture: Rather Cyborg than Goddess: Cyborgs, Robots, Androids and the Posthuman

Screening: *Ex_Machina* (Garland, 2014)

Seminar: We will work through the 'Cyborg Manifesto' together as a way of thinking about how we define ourselves and our experiences as human/posthuman. Can you become or must you be born a human? Why does Haraway suggest that she would rather be a cyborg than a goddess? How do Maria and Ava compare as cyborg women –has the SF representation of the woman changed?

Reading:

Donna J. Haraway, 1985. 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism', In Donna J. Haraway, 1991, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, New York., pp.161-181.

Brian R. Jacobson, 2016. 'Ex Machina in the Garden.' *Film Quarterly* 69:4, pp.23-34.

Further reading:

Amy C. Chambers, 2018. 'There's a reason Siri, Alexa and AI are imagined as female – sexism'. *The Conversation*. 13 August. URL: <https://theconversation.com/theres-a-reason-siri-alexa-and-ai-are-imagined-as-female-sexism-96430>

Week Three

Lecture: Space(s), Place, and Science Fiction in the City

Screening: *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982)

Seminar: **IN THIS SEMINAR WE WILL BE GOING OVER THE IN-CLASS ASSIGNMENT** in detail, as a 1-hour practical workshop. If you are unable to attend and have the relevant documentation to support your absence Amy will happily offer a catch-up session in advance of the assessment. It will relate directly to the reading from weeks 1-3 and should make sure you have read and annotated appropriately. **Also:** Find some examples from science fiction films that we can analyse for the aesthetics of science fiction focusing on space(s) and places. How does the location of SF alter the way it is interpreted by audiences? How does the city function as a metaphor in science fiction? How did Scott utilise the style and iconography of Film Noir - how do we define Tech Noir/Neo Noir?

Reading:

Vivian Sobchack, 'Cities on the edge of time: The Urban Science Fiction Film'. Annette Kuhn, ed., *Alien Zone II*. London: Verso. Chapter 6.

Giuliana Bruno, 'Ramble City: Postmodernism and *Blade Runner*', Annette Kuhn, ed., *Alien Zone*. London: Verso. Chapter 15.

Stephen Graham. 'Vertical Noir', *City* 20:3 (2016): 389-406.

Further reading:

Andrew Milner, 2004. 'Darker Cities: Urban Dystopia and Science Fiction Cinema,' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7:3, pp.259-279.

Week Four

Lecture: Surveillance, Free Will and the Dystopian Society

Screening: *GATTACA* (Nichol, 1997) – ****assessment clip to be shown prior to screening****

Seminar: Can you think of any examples of SF media that presents a utopian future? Why do you think science is often imagined as creating a worse future? What is the perfect human, and who decides? Why does SF tend to imagine future governments are totalitarian?

Reading:

David A. Kirby, (2000) The New Eugenics in Cinema: Genetic Determinism and Gene Therapy in *GATTACA*, *Science Fiction Studies* 27:2.

Jackie Stacey, (2005) Masculinity, Masquerade, and Genetic Impersonation: *Gattaca's* Queer Visions. *Signs* 30(3): 1851-1877.

Jackie Stacey, (2005) Imitation of life: the politics of the new genetics in cinema. In Graeme Harper and Andrew Moore, eds. *Signs of life: cinema and medicine*. London: Wallflower Press. Chapter 12.

Further reading:

Kirstie Ball, (2011) Organization, surveillance, and the body: towards a politics of resistance. In David Lyon, ed. *Theorizing surveillance: the panopticon and beyond*. London: Routledge. Chapter 14.

Week Five ****ASSESSMENT DUE THURSDAY****

Lecture: Aliens and Othering

Screening:

Seminar: In preparation for the seminar please do the reading and watch either: *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Roeg, 1976), *Alien* (Scott, 1979), or *Predator II* (Hopkins, 1990).

Reading:

Adilifu Nama (2008) *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*. University of Texas Press, pp. 10-41 (Chapter 1).

De Witt Douglas Kilgore. (2010). Difference Engine: Aliens, Robots, and Other Racial Matters in the History of Science Fiction. *Science Fiction Studies* 37(1): 16-22.

John G. Russell, (2013) Don't It Make My Black Face Blue: Race, Avatars, Albescence, and the Transnational Imaginary. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 46(1): 192-217.

Week Six: **READING WEEK**

Week Seven:

Lecture: Time Travel: Nostalgic Pasts and Imagined Futures

Screening: *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis, 1986)

Seminar: How does science fiction use images, memories, and iconography from the past? Is the past as difficult to imagine as the future? What is nostalgia, and how is it used in cinema - what is its creative potential?

Reading:

Andrew Gordon, 'Back to the Future: Oedipus as Time Traveller.' in Sean Redmond, ed., 2004. [*Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*](#). London: Wallflower Press, pp.116-125.

Constance Penley, 'Time Travel, Primal Scene and the Critical Dystopia', In Sean Redmond, ed., 2004. [*Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*](#). London: Wallflower Press, pp. 126-136.

Further reading:

Jennifer Harwood-Smith and Francis Ludlow, 2010. 'Doing it in style': The Narrative Roles of Time Travel in the Back to the Future Trilogy. In Sorcha Ní Fhlainn, ed., *The Worlds of Back to the Future*. Jefferson: McFarland, chapter 12.

Week Eight

Lecture: Spotless Minds and Injected Personalities: Memory, Self, and Identity in SF

Screening: *Dark City* (Proyas, 1999)

Seminar: Consider the ideas of who makes, owns, and stores memories - think about contemporary social media (e.g. Facebook with TimeHop) and its role for storing and mediating our own lived experiences. What happens if you can buy, sell, implant, or erase your memories? Are you still you? Are you still human? How does technology change our sense of identity?

Reading:

Charles Tryon (2004) Virtual Cities and Stolen Memories: Temporality and the Digital in *Dark City*. *Film Criticism* 28(2): 42-62,71.

Alison Landsberg, 1995. 'Prosthetic Memory: *Total Recall* and *Blade Runner*', In, Mike Featherstone, Roger Burrows eds., *Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*. London: Sage Publications, pp.175-190.

Neil Gerlach and Sheryl N. Hamilton, 'Preserving Self in the City of the Imagination: Georg Simmel and *Dark City*,' *Canadian Review of American Studies* 34: 2 (2004), pp.115-134.

Further reading:

Michael Pigott, 2008. 'Manifesting a Mutant Past in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*', In Christina Lee, *Violating time: history, memory and nostalgia in cinema*. London: Continuum.

Week Nine

Lecture: Virtual Reality and the Posthuman
Screening: *Strange Days* (Bigelow, 1995)

Seminar: If you had an experience implanted into you artificially would it make it any less 'real'? *Strange Days* is the only screening film on the module written and directed by a woman: how might that change your understanding of a film and its approach to the genre? Is *Strange Days* a feminist film? How does it subvert the male gaze?

Reading:

Emma J. Withers, (2018) Binary, coded: On the 'absence' of the digital in *Strange Days*. *Science Fiction Film and Television* 11(2): 277-302.

Catherine Zimmer, (2010) Surveillance and Social Memory: *Strange Days* Indeed. *Discourse* 32(3): 302-320

Stephen Shaviro, 2003. 'Straight from the Cerebral Cortex: Vision and Affect in *Strange Days*'. In Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond eds., *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor*. London: Wallflower, pp.159-177.

Further reading:

Donna J. Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto' – please revise

Week Ten:

Lecture: Trekkies, Warsies, Whovians, Browncoats: SF Fandom & Creating a Participatory Culture
Screening: *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977)/*Alien* (Scott, 1979)/*Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (Meyer, 1982)/*Serenity* (Whedon, 2005)...

Seminar: Please bring a piece of SF ephemera [a collectible item - originally expected to have short term use/popularity], or if you don't have anything bring a picture of something. We will be doing a show and tell opening to the seminar. I want you to think about why people collect things from the media/cultural texts they enjoy and how this might change their relationship with the text.

Reading:

Nathan Hunt (2003), 'The Importance of Trivia: Ownership, Exclusion and Authority in Science Fiction Fandom,' in Mark Jancovich, et al., eds., *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*. Manchester: MUP, chapter 12.

Matt Hills (2003), '*Star Wars* in Fandom, Film Theory, and the Museum: The Cultural Status of the Cult Blockbuster,' in Julian Stringer, ed., *Movie Blockbusters*. London: Routledge, chapter 11.

Will Brooker (1999), 'Internet Fandom and the Continuing Narratives of *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner* and *Alien* in Kuhn, ed., *Alien Zone II*. London: Verso, chapter 3.