

FI336-15 Science Fiction: Theory as Film

21/22

Department

SCAPVC - Film & Television Studies

Level

Undergraduate Level 3

Module leader

Catherine Constable

Credit value

15

Module duration

10 weeks

Assessment

Multiple

Study location

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

Description

Introductory description

The science fiction film genre has a reputation for being the most overtly philosophical or conceptual of all popular film genres. The module aims to enable students to engage with a diverse range of theoretical approaches to the science fiction film, including: the genre's alignment with the postmodern, presentations of space and the sublime, critical constructions of technology and gender, and philosophical conceptions of the human and the posthuman.

Module aims

1. The module will introduce students to influential and contemporary theoretical approaches, such as the postmodern and the posthuman and to develop a critical engagement with them.
2. The module will enable students to develop a critical understanding of readings of key science fiction films drawn from published scholarship.
3. Students will learn to analyse key aesthetic elements of the science fiction genre, such as the sublime.
4. The module will build on students' skills, developing their capacities for nuanced analysis of filmic and theoretical texts.
5. The module aims to enable students to consider the relationship between theoretical

frameworks and detailed textual analysis by placing the theory and film readings in dialogue with each other.

Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

Week 1: Introduction

Lecture: Introducing some key theorists of sf film, including: Sobchack, King and Bould.

Considering the ways in which sf has been regarded as the most theoretical of all the popular genres.

Screening: *Solaris*, Tarkovsky, 1972. (167 mins).

Seminars: We will address key themes in *Solaris* including: the construction of knowledge as a frontier, the characterisation of *Solaris* itself, woman as an imitation of the human, and the delineation of key qualities that comprise 'the human'.

Further Reading: M. Bould, *Science Fiction Film Guide Books Series*, London, Routledge, 2012.

King, Geoff and Krzywinska, *Science Fiction Cinema: From Outerspace to Cyberspace* London, Wallflower, 2000.

Sobchack, V. *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, revised edition, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987.

The Sublime and SF

Week 2: Philosophical Accounts of the Sublime

Lecture: an introduction to the philosophy of Burke and Kant focussing on their different accounts of the sublime.

Reading: Edmund Burke, 'Part II: the Sublime' *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 53-79.

Immanuel Kant, 'Mathematically Sublime' and 'Dynamically Sublime', sections 25-29, *The Critique of Judgment*, tr W. Pluhar, Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987, pp. 103-126, available online.

Screening: *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Stanley Kubrick, 1969. (Long screening - 149 mins)

Seminars: A discussion of the key features of Burke's sublime and its application to aesthetics. A discussion of Kant's model of the sublime and its links to transcendence as a form of narrative. A consideration of the ways in which *2001* draws on different conceptions of the sublime in its presentation of outer space and characterisation of the astronauts.

Further Reading: S. Bukatman, 'The Artificial Infinite: On Special Effects and the Sublime', *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century*, London: Duke University Press, 2003, pp. 81-110.

P. Shaw, *The Sublime*, London: Routledge, 2006. Chapter 3 on Burke offers a significantly different account from the lecture. Chapter 4 on Kant is a good introduction.

Week 3: The Technological Sublime

Lecture: an examination of David Nye's definitions of the variant versions of the technological sublime and his take up of Burke's conception of the 'artificial infinite'. A discussion of the links between presentations of outer space, the space race and the sublime.

Reading: Nye, 'Atomic Bomb and Apollo XI: New Forms of the Dynamic Sublime', *American Technological Sublime*, London, MIT Press, 1994, pp. 225-256.

Screening: Gravity, Alfonso Cuarón, 2013. (91 mins).

Seminars: An analysis of the different constructions of the sublime presented through the spectacles of the atomic bomb and the space race. Considering Gravity as a response to masculinist traditions of representation. Comparing and contrasting the representation of technology and the astronaut with 2001.

Further Reading: M. Bould, 'sf, spectacle and self-reflexivity', Science Fiction Film Guide Books Series, London: Routledge, 2012, pp. 60-144.

O. Weetch, 'You're Going to Make It: Ride Alignment and the Mastery of Steroscopic Space in Gravity', Expressive Spaces in Digital 3D Cinema, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 43-68.

Postmodern SF

Week 4: Jean Baudrillard

Lecture: An examination of Baudrillard's nihilistic conception of the postmodern, focussing on key ideas such as the hyperreal and the code. Reading Baudrillard as science fiction.

Reading: 'Precession of Simulacra', 'Science fiction' and 'Clone Story' from J. Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, S. F. Glaser (Tr.) University of Michigan Press, Michigan, 1994, pp. 1-42, 121-127, and 95-103 respectively.

Screening: The Matrix Reloaded, The Wachowski Brothers, 2003. (138 mins).

Seminars: An analysis of Baudrillard's views on sf and why he positions Ballard as the epitome of postmodern sf. A detailed examination of 'Clone Story' with a view to considering how far Baudrillard's arguments are instantiated by the figures of Sam in Moon.

Further Reading: J. Baudrillard, America, Tr. C. Turner, New York, Verso, 1988.

C. Constable, Adapting Philosophy: Jean Baudrillard and The Matrix Trilogy, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009.

S. Bukatman, Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993. A very sound grasp of Baudrillard and interesting readings of a variety of science fiction films, including Blade Runner.

Week 5: Interfaces and Identity

Lecture: Positioning Terminal Identity as a response to Baudrillard and Jameson. An examination of Bukatman's highly influential work on cyberspace and filmic explorations of that space.

Bukatman's definition of a masculinist paradigm epitomised by films such as TRON.

Reading: S. Bukatman, 'Terminal Penetration', Terminal Identity: the Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction, London: Duke University Press, 1993, pp. 183-240.

Screening: Lucy, Luc Besson, 2014. (89 mins).

Seminars: A discussion of ways models drawn from modernist art have impacted on the representation of cyberspace on screen. The overlap between models of transcendence and the presentation of cyberspace as the opposite/alternative to 'meat space'. Comparing and contrasting TRON with later constructions of interfaces, bodies and cyberspaces in Lucy.

Further Reading: S. Gillis, 'Cyber Noir: Cyberspace, (Post)Feminism and the Femme Fatale', The Matrix Trilogy: Cyberpunk Reloaded, London: Wallflower Press, 2005, pp. 74-85.

A. Balsamo, Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women, Duke University Press, 1996. See chapters 5 and 6 for analyses of cyberspace.

Week 7: Technologies performing gender

Lecture: An analysis of Judith Butler's concept of 'performativity', her conception of identity as a series of speech acts and construction of gender as performative. Aylish Wood's take up of Butler's work in relation to gendering technology.

Reading: J. Butler, section "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions", *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, London, 1990, especially pp. 183-193.

A. Wood, *Technoscience in contemporary American Film: Beyond science fiction*, Manchester: MUP, 2002, Chapter 4, 'It's Alive', pp. 114-145.

Screening: *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2015). (108 mins).

Seminars: discussion of Butler's argument that certain types of parodic performance have radical potential. An analysis of the characterisation in *Ex Machina* and the extent to which it can be considered to subvert normative standards of femininity and masculinity.

Further Reading: J. Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination", *Inside/Out*, D. Fuss (Ed.), Routledge, New York and London, 1991.

J. Butler, "Gender as Performance, An Interview with Judith Butler", P. Osborne and L. Segal (Eds.), *Radical Philosophy*, no 67, 1994, pp. 32-39.

C. Constable, 'Surfaces of Science Fiction: Enacting Gender and 'Humanness' in *Ex Machina*', *Film Philosophy 'Surfaces'* special issue, vol. 22, no. 2.

C. Constable, "Feminism, Postmodernism and the Aesthetics of Parody", *Differential Aesthetics*, P. Forence and N. Foster (Eds.), Aldershot, Ashgate Press, 2000. An analysis of Baudrillard, Butler and To Die For.

The Posthuman

Week 8: Donna Haraway

Lecture: An examination of Donna Haraway's position as the move towards the 'posthuman'. Her analysis of the cyborg and use of it as a multifaceted, positive figure.

Screening: *Alien Resurrection*, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997. 109 mins.

Reading: D. Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, 1991, especially pp. 149-155, 160-163, 173-181.

Seminars: a discussion of Haraway's analysis of new technologies. An analysis of the ways in which characters from *Alien Resurrection* might be said to both instantiate and to problematise Haraway's vision of the cyborg.

Further Reading: H. Gray (Ed.) *The Cyborg Handbook*, Routledge, London, 1995. (Section 4, entitled 'Cyborgs in the Imagination' contains work on film).

A. Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women*, Duke University Press, 1996.

Week 9: Rosi Braidotti

Lecture: An introduction to Braidotti's conception of the posthuman and its emphasis on materiality. The erasure of key dualisms, particularly mind/matter, which have structured Western philosophical thought. The status of Braidotti's theorising as a form of fiction.

Reading: R. Braidotti, Extract from chapter 2: 'Post-Anthropocentrism: Life Beyond the Species', *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, pp. 55-67.

Screening: *Annihilation*, Alex Garland, 2018. (115 mins).

Seminars: A discussion of Braidotti's definition of 'zoe' and its implications for models of transcendence. Comparing and contrasting zoe with Baudrillard's code. A discussion of *Annihilation* and the ways in which the shimmer's materiality might be said to operate as a filmic instantiation of zoe. A consideration of the ways in which the female protagonists relate to the shimmer.

Further Reading: R. Braidotti and N. Lykke (eds), *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations with Science, Medicine and Cyberspace*, London, Zed Books, 1996.

Week 10:

Screening: Under the Skin, Jonathan Glazer, 2013. (108 mins).

Seminars: A discussion of Under The Skin and the ways in which the film interrogates conceptions of gender and the human. To what extent can it be considered to endorse/instantiate any/all of the theories discussed this term, including the sublime, the postmodern and the posthuman?

Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- 1. Students will learn to provide accurate accounts of the key theoretical approaches covered by the module, such as the postmodern and the posthuman, and show the development of a critical evaluation of the different approaches.
- 2. Students will demonstrate a critical understanding of readings of your chosen films drawn from published scholarship.
- 3. Students will learn to engage with analyses of key aesthetic elements of the science fiction genre, such as the sublime.
- 4. Students will demonstrate an ability to offer nuanced and detailed analyses of theoretical and filmic texts.
- 5. Students will consider the relationship between theoretical frameworks and detailed textual analysis by placing the theory and film readings in dialogue with each other.

Indicative reading list

Weekly reading is listed in the outline syllabus.

FURTHER READING

The Journal of Science Fiction Film and Television, Liverpool University press, is available as hard copy or on line and is well worth investigating for articles on key films.

Balsamo, A. (1996) Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women. (Durham and London: Duke University Press).

Battersby, C. (2007) The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference. (London: Routledge).

Blouin, Michael. (2013) 'Tarrying with Sublimity: the Limits of Cinematic Form in Duncan Jones' Source Code'. Terror and the Cinematic Sublime: Essays on Violence and the Unpresentable in Post 9/11 Films. Ed. Todd. A. Corner and Lloyd Isaac Vayo (London: McFarland and Company) pp. 103-118.

Bould, M. (2012) Science Fiction Film Guide Books Series (London: Routledge).

Bould, M. (2014) Solaris: BFI Film Classics. (London: BFI).

Braidotti, R. (2013) The Posthuman. (Cambridge: Polity Press).

Brooker, P., Brooker, W. (Eds). (1997) Postmodern After-Images: A Reader in Film, Television and Video. (London: Arnold).

Buckland, Warren (Ed). (2014) Hollywood Puzzle Films. (London: Routledge).

Bukatman, S. (2016) Blade Runner: BFI Film Classics. (London: BFI).

Bukatman, S. (2003) Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century. (London: Duke University Press).

Bukatman, S. (1993) Terminal Identity: the Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction. (London: Duke University Press).

Burke, E. (1990) [1757] *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Cameron, Allan and Misek, Richard. (2014) 'modular spacetime in the 'intelligent' blockbuster: inception and source code.' *Hollywood Puzzle Films*. (London: Routledge) pp. 109-124.

Chion, M. (2001) *Kubrick's Cinema Odyssey*. Tr Claudia Gorbman (London: BFI).

Kant, I. (1987) [1790] *The Critique of Judgment*. Tr W. Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company).

Kenny, A. (1998). *A Brief History of Western Philosophy*. (Oxford: Blackwell).

King, Geoff and Krzywinska. (2000) *Science Fiction Cinema: From Outerspace to Cyberspace*. (London: Wallflower).

Kuhn, A. (Ed) (1990) *Alien Zone*. (London: Verso).

Kuhn, A. (Ed) (1999) *Alien Zone II*. (London: Verso).

Lloyd, G. (1984) *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*. (London: Routledge).

Osterweil, A. (2014) 'Under the Skin: the perils of becoming female', *Film Quarterly*, 67:4, 44-51.

McHale, B. (2000) 'POSTcyberMODERNpunkISM', *Postmodern Literary Theory*, N. Lucy (Ed.) (Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers) pp. 24-263.

Nye, D. (1994) *American Technological Sublime* (London: MIT Press).

Seed, D. (Ed) (2008) *A Companion to Science Fiction*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing).

Sobchack, V. (1987) *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, revised edition. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press).

Stacey, J. *The Cinematic Life of the Gene*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press).

Weetch, O. (2016) *Expressive Spaces in Digital 3D Cinema*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

Wood, A. (2002) *Technoscience in Contemporary American Film: Beyond Science Fiction*. (Manchester: MUP).

Subject specific skills

This module develops skills of audio-visual literacy, through close textual and/or contextual analysis in relation to the moving image and sound. It may also develop understandings of historical, theoretical and conceptual frameworks relevant to screen arts and cultures.

Transferable skills

- critical and analytical thinking in relation
- independent research skills
- team work
- clarity and effectiveness of communication, oral and written
- accurate, concise and persuasive writing
- audio-visual literacy

Study

Study time

Type	Required
Lectures	8 sessions of 1 hour 30 minutes (8%)
Seminars	18 sessions of 1 hour (12%)
Other activity	27 hours (18%)
Private study	91 hours (61%)
Total	148 hours

Private study description

reading and viewing in preparation for seminars and assessment

Other activity description

This module requires screenings of science fiction films, the majority of which are over 2 hours long and, at least 3 of which are nearly 3 hours long.

Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

Assessment

You must pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Assessment group B1

	Weighting	Study time
Online Examination	100%	2 hours
Students can alternatively write a 5,000 word research essay instead of taking the 2 hour exam.		

- Online examination: No Answerbook required

Assessment group A1

	Weighting	Study time
Written Assignment (5000 words)	100%	

Feedback on assessment

Students who choose to do a formative essay receive written feedback on the hard copy and additional typed feedback. This feedback is discussed individually in class.

Students doing the long summative essay receive written feedback on the hard copy and typed feedback on Tabula.

Students doing the exam can discuss their exam performance with the module tutor in a tutorial.

[Past exam papers for FI336](#)

Availability

Courses

This module is Core optional for:

- Year 4 of UHPA-RP43 Undergraduate Hispanic Studies with Film Studies

This module is Optional for:

- Year 3 of UFIA-W620 Undergraduate Film Studies
- Year 4 of UFIA-W621 Undergraduate Film Studies (with Year Abroad)
- Year 4 of UFIA-QW25 Undergraduate Film and Literature
- Year 4 of UFIA-QW26 Undergraduate Film and Literature (with Study Abroad)

This module is Core option list A for:

- Year 4 of UGEA-RP33 Undergraduate German with Film Studies

This module is Option list A for:

- Year 3 of UFIA-QW25 Undergraduate Film and Literature
- Year 4 of UFRA-R1WA Undergraduate French with Film Studies