Science Fiction Cinema

One Day Course

Tutor: Michael Parkes
Science Fiction Cinema

This course will examine how the science fiction genre has explored the relationship between humanity, technology and the other, to try to answer the question “what does it mean to be human?” The course will chart the history of the genre; from the early worlds of fantasy depicted in silent films, through to the invasion anxieties of the war years, the body politics of the 70s and 80s and the representation of technology in contemporary sci-fi cinema. The one day course will also examine how the genre is currently being rebranded for contemporary audiences and how fandom has been important to its success. The course will include lots of clips, resources for you to take away and the opportunity to discuss the important questions that science fiction cinema asks.

What is Science Fiction?

Most film genres are difficult to compartmentalise but there often tends to be one key convention that allows us to understand the nature of the film. Horror films are scary, Comedies make us laugh but Science Fiction appears to be a little more complicated and difficult to tie down. They can be about the future, but then again can be set in the past, they explore themes of identity, technology and the other but then again sometimes don’t! It has been a long standing struggle in Film Studies to really define what science fiction is; some believe it is a sub-genre of Horror whereas others believe it is a genre of its own merit. It is this difficult position which science fiction holds that makes it so interesting to anyone studying film, as it’s a genre that is constantly changing, evolving and adapting to contemporary audiences. This course will attempt to explore how the genre has evolved over time and how it has provided a unique space in cinema history to discuss social and political concerns and issues, make a lot of money at the box office and at the same time recruit a loyal army of fans and supporters that can make or break a movie.

Science fiction was one of the first genres to be explored in narrative cinema. A number of early pioneers discovered the unique properties of the film camera in creating effects on screen and the potential this had for fiction story telling. Early films that stopped the camera rolling to make something disappear were already laying the foundations for cinema to create weird and wonderful worlds for audiences. This combined with the skills of theatrical stage craft enabled filmmakers to create alien worlds and fantastic journeys. The early cinema of George Méliès is a great example of this ability to create special effects and lay the foundations for the genre. Today audience are still drawn to the unique special effects and worlds that science fiction can create. An audience member going to see Avatar (2009) or A Trip to the Moon (1902) are effectively drawn to going to see the same thing.
As the genre became more serious and complex with the addition of longer running times and detailed narratives, Science fiction became a space to discuss issues and concerns in the real world. Films like *Metropolis* (1927) were able to take an almost Marxist position in critiquing social class divisions, technology and modern working methods. Others like Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936) questioned progress itself and the effects of technology on exploiting workers. Science fiction appeared to occupy a unique space in being able to critique the modern world without actually representing the modern world itself, deferring critique into the future or alien worlds. This is what makes science fiction such a useful tool for filmmakers, providing a safe space to question the modern world.

This critique continued throughout the second world war as the genre represented war, invasion and the looming threats of totalitarian regimes. Films like *Things to Come* (1936) depicted a world plagued with constant invasion and falling atomic bombs. After the war concerns shifted to the effects of atomic energy and warfare with films like *Them* (1954) and *The Blob* (1958) posited atomic science as an un-tested and mis-understood tool that required caution. The genre also subtlety tackled fears of communist invasion and subversion throughout the 1950s with films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) claiming ‘You’re Next’ to audiences whilst also critiquing suburban conformity in post war America.

The post war utopia of 1950s America seemed to slip away on screen throughout the 60s and 70s and was replaced by cinematic dystopias like *Soylent Green* (1973) and *Westworld* (1973) which posed the question that not all was quite right with these perfect worlds. If you scratch the surface of these films there is always something dark lurking, controlling and manipulating things from afar. These films took issue with the politics of Richard Nixon and the Watergate scandal but also the role of women and men in post feminist America especially in *The Stepford Wives* (1975). This was to all change after the success of *Star Wars* (1977) as film producers realised the potential of the genre in capturing the attention of audiences and the added incentive of film merchandising.

Throughout the 1980s science fiction became a main staple at the box office and was opened up to all members of the family in response to the building of out of town multiplexes. Films like *ET: The Extra Terrestrial* (1982) and *Back to the Future* (1985) were both science fiction and family films that proved popular with audiences of all ages. Special effects remained a key attraction for audiences and these films drew attention to video effects throughout the marketing for the films especially the use of groundbreaking computer effects in films like *Tron* (1982). The 90s continued this practice with films like *Jurassic Park* (1993) and *Independence Day* (1996) providing blockbuster entertainment for all the family, but things turned a little darker towards the end of the decade with the looming threat of the millennium bug and the internet. Films like *The Matrix* (1999) questioned our reliance on technology whilst at the same time using state of the art camera technology to bring special effects to the screen.

After 9/11 science fiction appeared to evolve again in response to the threat of terrorism and question the role of the individual in society through the Superhero sub-genre of science fiction. Films like *X-Men* (2000) *Spiderman* (2002) and *Ironman* (2008) frame individual heroes against quasi terrorist organisations whilst at the same time engaging with wider and diverse audiences. Science fiction, despite its geeky image is one of the largest and most successful film genres at the box office and today, enjoys wide appeal. Science fiction fandom is itself big business and film producers currently engage with fan communities early on to ensure the success of films. This process is still in its infancy but is likely to be developed in the future, creating greater interaction with audiences. Science fiction will continue to develop and evolve to respond to society and cinema audiences and will no doubt remain a key genre at the box office and continue to engage with the audience of the future.
Course Outline

Morning Session

The Modern Prometheus: Exploring the Science Fiction Genre
The morning session will introduce you to the layout of the course; its key aims and objectives and give you a chance to meet the rest of the group. We will explore some of our favourite sci-fi films and question what makes a sci-fi film. We will examine some early examples of science fiction from the early days of silent film. We will examine how these early films established the conventions of sci-fi for film and how important special effects were for early audiences. We will also explore how science fiction has often mediated concerns in society around technology, progress and the other. We will examine some classic sci-fi from the 20s to analyse the impact of modernism of the genre and uncover what makes sci-fi the perfect forum for societal critique.

Prezi link: http://prezi.com/yj79_kirpmnx/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy&rc=ex0share

Break

Afternoon Session

Science Fiction Cinema, Society and History
This session will explore how science fiction cinema has often been used to explore anxieties and concerns in society and how this has changed throughout the 20th century. We will start by examining science fiction films from the 1940s and how sci-fi films represent war and the threat of totalitarian regimes and technology. We will also uncover how science fiction can boost morale and create a space for representing war without engaging with reality. We will examine how fears of communist subversion inspired sci-fi cinema of the 1950s; how sci-fi became a space for debate around the McCarthy witchhunts and explored issues of suburban America and themes of identity both in the US and the UK. By focusing on the 1960s and 70s we will analyse how sci-fi became pessimistic and questioned Vietnam, Nixon and gender politics.

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Break
Plenary Session

Contemporary Science Fiction and the Audience of the Future
This session will explore contemporary science fiction cinema and how the genre raises concerns about our dependence on technology, the rise of the internet and its effects on identity. We will also explore how these themes have appeared before and what they say about contemporary audiences. We will also explore how science fiction rebranded itself for contemporary audiences in the form of the Superhero sub-genre and how these films responded to the post 9/11 context and questioned the role of the individual in society. We will conclude the day by examining how the marketing and the rebooting of sci-fi franchises has led to a radical shift in what is considered science fiction for contemporary audiences. We will also examine the future of the genre and the complex role fans take in the production and marketing of sci-fi films.

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Recommended Reading

Seeing is Believing: Or How Hollywood Taught us to Stop Worrying and Love the 50s By Peter Biskind

Science Fiction Cinema: From Outerspace to Cyberspace By Geoff king and Tanya Krzywinska

Science Fiction Edited By Phil Hardy

Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality by Christine Cornea

Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema By Annette Kuhn

Projecting Tomorrow: Science Fiction and Popular Cinema (Cinema and Society) By James Chapman

Science Fiction (The New Critical Idiom) by Adam Roberts

British Science Fiction Cinema (British Popular Cinema) By I Q Hunter
Recommended Watching

Time Out Magazines List of the 100 Best Science Fiction Films
Leading sci-fi experts, filmmakers, science fiction writers, film critics and scientists pick the best sci-fi movies ever made

To find the 100 best sci-fi movies of all time, we asked more than 100 scientists, writers and film experts, from Stephen King and George RR Martin through to Guillermo Del Toro, John Carpenter and C-3PO actor Anthony Daniels, to tell us their favourite science fiction movies, and they responded with an eclectic selection of the finest sci-fi in the history of cinema. From complex headscratchers to multiplex hits, pioneering classics to modern movies that are dismantling the limits of what film can achieve, this is where you’ll find every single film that made it into our list.

http://www.timeout.com/london/film/the-100-best-sci-fi-movies-full-list

100 Independence Day (1996) Director: Roland Emmerich
99 Three Colours: Red (1994) Director: Krzysztof Kieślowski
98 2010 (1984) Director: Peter Hyams
97 Superman (1978) Director: Richard Donner
96 Pitch Black (2000) Director: David Twohy
95 Serenity (2005) Director: Joss Whedon
94 Alphaville (1965) Director: Jean-Luc Godard
93 THX 1138 (1971) Director: George Lucas
92 Solaris (2002) Director: Steven Soderbergh
91 Attack the Block (2011) Director: Joe Cornish
90 The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension (1984) Director: WD Richter
89 Fantastic Voyage (1966) Director: Richard Fleischer
87 The Damned (1963) Director: Joseph Losey
86 Barbarella (1968) Director: Roger Vadim
85 The Andromeda Strain (1971) Director: Robert Wise
84 Frankenstein (1931) Director: James Whale
83 Things to Come (1936) Director: William Cameron Menzies
82 Pacific Rim (2013) Director: Guillermo del Toro
81 The Iron Giant (1999) Director: Brad Bird
80 Star Trek (2009) Director: JJ Abrams
79 Ghost in the Shell (1995) Director: Mamoru Oshii
78 World on a Wire (1973) Director: Rainer Werner Fassbinder
77 Avatar (2009) Director: James Cameron
76 The Truman Show (1998) Director: Peter Weir
75 Return of the Jedi (1983) Director: Richard Marquand
74 Flash Gordon (1980) Director: Mike Hodges
73 The American Astronaut (2001) Director: Cory McAbee
72 Seconds (1966) Director: John Frankenheimer
71 The Prestige (2006) Director: Christopher Nolan
70 Iron Man (2008) Director: Jon Favreau
69 Logan’s Run (1976) Director: Michael Anderson
68 Westworld (1973) Director: Michael Crichton
67 The Thing from Another World (1951) Director: Christian Nyby
66 The Abyss (1989) Director: James Cameron
65 The War of the Worlds (1953) Director: Byron Haskin
64 Sleeper (1973) Director: Woody Allen
63 Je t’aime, je t’aime (1968) Director: Alain Resnais
62 Dark City (1998) Director: Alex Proyas
61 Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior (1981) Director: George Miller
60 Quatermass and the Pit (1968) Director: Roy Ward Baker
59 Gravity (2013) Director: Alfonso Cuarón
58 Donnie Darko (2001) Director: Richard Kelly
57 Dune (1984) Director: David Lynch
56 The Time Machine (1960) Director: George Pal
55 Repo Man (1984) Director: Alex Cox
54 Soylent Green (1973) Director: Richard Fleischer
53 Akira (1988) Director: Katsuhiro Otomo
52 Predator (1987) Director: John McTiernan
51 Fantastic Planet (1973) Director: René Laloux
50 Under the Skin (2013) Director: Jonathan Glazer
49 Starship Troopers (1997) Director: Paul Verhoeven
47 Contact (1997) Director: Robert Zemeckis
46 Her (2013) Director: Spike Jonze
45 District 9 (2009) Director: Neill Blomkamp
43 Total Recall (1990) Director: Paul Verhoeven
42 The Fifth Element (1997) Director: Luc Besson
41 They Live (1988) Director: John Carpenter
40 WALL-E (2008) Director: Andrew Stanton
39 Dark Star (1974) Director: John Carpenter
38 Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1978) Director: Philip Kaufman
37 Primer (2004) Director: Shane Carruth
36 Inception (2010) Director: Christopher Nolan
35 The Man Who Fell to Earth (1976) Director: Nicolas Roeg
34 Galaxy Quest (1999) Director: Dean Parisot
33 Silent Running (1972) Director: Douglas Trumbull
32 Gattaca (1997) Director: Andrew Niccol
31 The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951) Director: Robert Wise
30 Jurassic Park (1993) Director: Steven Spielberg
29 Planet of the Apes (1968) Director: Franklin J Schaffner
28 La Jetée (1962) Director: Chris Marker
27 A Clockwork Orange (1971) Director: Stanley Kubrick
26 Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) Director: Don Siegel
23 AI Artificial Intelligence (2001) Director: Steven Spielberg
22 Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004) Director: Michel Gondry
21 Back to the Future (1985) Director: Robert Zemeckis
20 Forbidden Planet (1956) Director: Fred M Wilcox
19 The Fly (1986) Director: David Cronenberg
18 Children of Men (2006) Director: Alfonso Cuarón
17 Solaris (1972) Director: Andrei Tarkovsky

15 Stalker (1979) Director: Andrei Tarkovsky

14 Moon (2009) Director: Duncan Jones

13 The Matrix (1999) Director: Lana and Andy Wachowski

12 The Thing (1982) Director: John Carpenter

11 ET the Extra-Terrestrial (1982) Director: Steven Spielberg

10 The Empire Strikes Back (1980) Director: Irvin Kershner

9 The Terminator (1984) Director: James Cameron

8 Metropolis (1927) Director: Fritz Lang

7 Brazil (1985) Director: Terry Gilliam

6 Star Wars (1977) Director: George Lucas

5 Aliens (1986) Director: James Cameron

4 Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977) Director: Steven Spielberg

3 Alien (1979) Director: Ridley Scott


1 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) Director: Stanley Kubrick

**Notes:**