PS 350 – Politics and Film
Fall 2014
Wednesdays 6-9pm
Lillis 282

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Utopia/Dystopia and the Politics of the Future

“Idealists and reformers all become executioners in their turn. The road to utopia ends with the steps of the scaffold, the endless moment of the guillotine.” -- Grant Morrison

“The future is already here — it’s just not very evenly distributed.” -- William Gibson

“Normally, when you challenge the conventional wisdom — that the current economic and political system is the only possible one — the first reaction you are likely to get is a demand for a detailed architectural blueprint of how an alternative system would work, down to the nature of its financial instruments, energy supplies, and policies of sewer maintenance. Next, you are likely to be asked for a detailed program of how this system will be brought into existence. Historically, this is ridiculous. When has social change ever happened according to someone’s blueprint? It’s not as if a small circle of visionaries in Renaissance Florence conceived of something they called ‘capitalism,’ figured out the details of how the stock exchange and factories would someday work, and then put in place a program to bring their visions into reality. In fact, the idea is so absurd we might well ask ourselves how it ever occurred to us to imagine this is how change happens to begin.” -- David Graeber

Course Description:
Film culture is perhaps inextricably linked to visions of the future—broad aesthetic imaginings of what is possible, where humanity may go, and how we might get there. Some of these visions are utopian, offering viewers a means of experiencing idealized versions of what may unfold in the forward progression of time: perfect governance, conflict-free societies, beautiful art, and universal human fulfillment and satisfaction. Some of these visions are dystopian, offering viewers a means of experiencing deeply flawed and problematic social and political circumstances: war, poverty, oppression, and dire hopelessness. Yet even in its darkest dystopian corners, where the future is visually/sonically rendered as hellish and full of danger and uncertainty, film can reveal to viewers the desires that drive us to present action; film can give us a window onto what we want right now, and how those wants and desires push us to work towards new, sometimes better, and in the very least different societies today.

We begin from the assumption that film’s tendency to imagine the future is thus deeply political, and has palpable political consequence. Film does not simply reflect our cultural norms, values, beliefs, and desires; it actively shapes them and provides viewers with the material to recreate our present circumstances, to imagine worlds differently. Following from there, this course is designed to explore the politics at work in film’s tendency to imagine the future—politics of race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, geography, technology, bodies, and so on—and will help students equip themselves with a variety of techniques of analysis and interpretation that will help you more capably do the politics of the future.
Course Goals:
The goal of the course is not to mold you into that banal creature, that contemporary corporate-academic institutional wasteling, the “Critical Thinker,” but to contest the boundaries of thought and explore the very possibilities of filmic political experience together. As such, the goal of this course can’t help but be explicitly political: to work towards becoming what theorist and critic Judith Halberstam has called “an unprofessional force of fugitive knowers.” Rather than regularize, normalize, or compartmentalize our approach to political-cultural interpretation, this course is designed to encourage the tactics of boundary-crossing and creativity that allow for “fugitive knowing.” If you’re not sure what that means, you’re not alone. I’m not sure I get it yet either. But I’d like to try and find out with you.

In order to achieve this goal (or fail together trying), we will:

- Watch, discuss, and interpret films.
- Read, a lot.
- Write (in several different styles).
- Experiment/play with ideas.

Readings:
Three books are assigned for the course. All other readings will be made available online through Blackboard. Students are responsible for purchasing or otherwise procuring the books, and are responsible for all readings assigned. Please note that students are required to bring all assigned readings to class the day we discuss them—failure to do so will result in your inability to effectively participate.

The three books assigned are:


Assignments:

In-Class Writing and Participation- 20%
Every week throughout the term students will respond to a short written prompt, image, or film clip shown during class, using no more than a few sentences to convey your thoughts. Not exactly quizzes, and not exactly free-writes, these are intended to be intellectual springboards into discussion for the day and should show engagement with the material at hand given the readings and/or films assigned that week.

Course Blog - 30%
Students are responsible for posting one original, question-driven film review to the course blog during the term. That is, your review must substantively engage the film, and do work to consider the assigned readings in relation to film. (I will provide examples both on Blackboard and the Blog). A sign-up sheet will be passed around the first week of class in order to assign students a particular film to review, the list for which is composed of films either screened in class or assigned as homework. Additionally, you must substantively respond at least ten times to your peers’ posts, meaning that you will write into the course blog at least eleven times over the entire term. The goal of this assignment is to create virtual conversations and expand the dialogue between student, instructor, and GTF beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom, and to deepen our collective knowledge pool. A link to the blog is available on Blackboard, or it can be found directly at [http://blogs.uoregon.edu/ps350f14plencner/](http://blogs.uoregon.edu/ps350f14plencner/)
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Criticism Assignment - 10%
This short research project will ask you to independently compile, read, and write a two-page response to different styles of film criticism, ranging from popular to academic. Specific directions will be announced Week 1, with responses due by class time Week 3.

Twitter Assignment - 10%
Students will live-tweet one film screened during the first half of the term in order to publically document their immediate thoughts and reactions. Following this, students will reflect on their tweets in a short two-page response paper. Directions for this assignment will be distributed Week 1, and the assignment must be completed by class time Week 5. (If you don’t have a Twitter account, or don’t wish to use your personal account for this assignment, you must create one for the course at https://twitter.com/signup ). All tweets must use the hashtag: #UOPoliticsandFilm

Final Paper/Project - 30%
The final paper will ask you to utilize major concepts discussed over the course of the term in a research-length comparative film analysis (6-8pp). Specific directions will be announced Week 4, with papers due in class Week 9. Alternatively, students may propose a creative final project for the course, per instructor approval. Any student interested in doing an alternative final project must contact me no later than Week 5 in order to discuss the idea, scope, and execution of the project.

Expectations:
You will read (and view) everything assigned—before class—each week. This is not an edict. It’s an assumption of your commitment to the class and ability to pass it. The histories, concepts, and theories used in this course are sophisticated and will challenge you. If you do not prepare yourself by reading and taking notes, you will become lost in the material. Ask questions. Participate appropriately in discussion. Add to each other’s understanding by sharing challenges as well as insights.

Additionally, in this course you will be viewing, reading, discussing, and writing about explicit material and concepts, including race, gender, sexuality, war, religion, bodies, violence, etc. If you are uncomfortable engaging intellectually with any of these topics in a safe, respectful, and thoughtful manner, this is not the course for you. Any student who fails to meet this expectation—that is, fails to respect the material or the integrity of their peers—will be asked to drop immediately.

Technology in the Classroom:
Students are encouraged to use whatever laptop, tablet, smartphone or other device they deem necessary to participate effectively in the course. Because this is a “hybrid” course, with much of your work submitted virtually, using technology in the classroom will be very beneficial. Please do not use this opportunity to distract yourself or your peers—the instructor and the GTFs will do their best to maintain a productive classroom and will use their discretion in dealing with individual students accordingly.

Academic Honesty:
The University of Oregon regards plagiarism as an offense of academic misconduct, and any such offense committed in this course, plagiarism or otherwise, will be dealt with accordingly. If you are caught plagiarizing, cheating, or submitting work not produced solely for this course, you will at minimum fail the assignment, and your case will be reported to the Office of Student Conduct for review. When in doubt, cite. If you have further questions about how to avoid plagiarism or the proper use of citations, see: http://libweb.uoregon.edu/guides/plagiarism/students/
Course Content Note:
Some of the film images and scenes we will encounter, think about, and discuss during the term can be considered trauma triggers. These include graphic depictions of racial and sexual violence and bodily gore. Although we need you to be present during lecture in order to participate in discussion and graded in-class work, students who choose to excuse themselves from screenings on account of potentially triggering content do not need to explain themselves to me and will not be penalized in any way. Please use your best judgment and practice self-care. I encourage you to watch the films on your own terms; however, if this isn’t an option for you, I can direct you to appropriate alternative films that will help you fulfill the course writing requirements.

Accessibility Note:
In the interest of creating an inclusive learning environment, issues related to accessibility will be reasonably accommodated. Please notify me if there are any aspects of this course that result in documented disability-related barriers to your full and active participation. Alternatively, you can contact the university’s Accessible Education Center (formerly Disability Services) in 164 Oregon Hall at 541-346-1155 or at uoaec@uoregon.edu, who will direct me as to how best to accommodate you.

Student Safety Note:
Conflict can manifest itself variously and subtly in an academic environment. If you feel that you have been subjected to or have witnessed bias, unfairness, intimidation, harassment, or other improper treatment, you have several resources available to you that can help redress your grievance. For issues arising between student peers, you may choose to contact me as your first line of help. If for whatever reason you are uncomfortable doing so, or for issues that carry with them significant power differentials, including concerns arising between students and GTFs as well as between students and the Instructor, the main administrative remedy available to you is discussing the situation with the Chair of the Department of Political Science, Priscilla Southwell, who can be contacted at: psouth@uoregon.edu; or 541-346-4866; or in her office, PLC 940. In addition, other resources available to you include:

- UO Bias Response Team: 541-346-1139 or http://bias.uoregon.edu/whatbrt.htm
- Conflict Resolution Services: 541-346-0617 or http://bit.ly/SeWXiN
- Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity: 541-346-3123 or http://aaeo.uoregon.edu/
- UO Police Department (Non-Emergency): 541-346-2919 or http://police.uoregon.edu/contact-us
**INSTRUCTOR RESERVES THE RIGHT TO MAKE CHANGES TO THIS SCHEDULE**
- Students will be notified of any changes/additions/alterations through Blackboard/E-mail.

**Week 1: How to Look at Movies and Other Political Things:**
- Introduction and course overview
- Blog sign-up
- In-class screening:
- Watch for next week:
  - Link available on Course Blog and Blackboard

**Week 2: Art, Technology, and the Production of Vision**
- In class-screening (short):
  - Méliès, “A Trip to the Moon” (1902)
- In-class screening (feature):
  - Vertov, “Man with the Movie Camera” (1929)
- Read for next week:
  - More, *Utopia*, excerpts from Book II (on Bb)
  - Levitas, excerpt from introduction to *The Concept of Utopia* (on Bb)
  - Rutsky, “Between Modernity and Magic” (on Bb)
- Watch for next week:
  - Lang, “Metropolis” (1927)

**Week 3: Definitions of “Utopia”: Place, Time, Style**
- In-class screening:
  - Capra, “The Lost Horizon” (1937)
- Read for next week:
  - Ashcroft, “Critical Utopias” (on Bb)
  - Sargent, “Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited” (on Bb)
  - Jackson, “The Lottery” (on Bb)
  - Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (on Bb)
- Watch for next week:
  - Kubrick, “Barry Lyndon” (1975)

**Week 4: Engendering Utopian Desire**
- In-class screening (clips):
- In-class screening (primary):
  - Hardy, “The Wicker Man” (1973)
- Read for next week:
  - Gilman, *Herland* (entire)
- Watch for next week:
  - Scott, “Thelma and Louise” (1991)

**Week 5: Fear and Liberalism in Dystopia**
- In-class screening (clips):
  - Various possible options include: “The Day the Earth Stood Still,” “Invasion of the Body Snatchers,” “Night of the Living Dead”
- In-class screening (primary):
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- Read for next week:
  - Carpenter, “They Live!” (1988)
  - Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style of American Politics” (on Bb)
  - Begin reading: Heinlein, *Starship Troopers* (Chps. 1-8)
- Watch for next week:

**Week 6: Empire, Dystopia, and the Other**
- In-class screening:
  - Verhoeven, “Starship Troopers” (1997)
- Read for next week:
  - Finish reading: Heinlein, *Starship Troopers* (Chps. 9-14)
  - TBD (on Bb)
- Watch for next week:
  - Lucas, “Star Wars” (1977)

**Week 7: Revolting against Dystopia**
- In-class screening:
- Read for next week:
  - Halberstam, “Introduction” and “Animating Revolt and Revolting Animation” in *The Queer Art of Failure* (pp. 1-52)
  - de Certeau, “Walking in the City” (on Bb)
- Watch for next week:
  - Clark, “Kids” (1995)

**Week 8: Embodying Utopia**
- In-class screening:
  - Livingston, “Paris is Burning” (1990)
- Read for next week:
  - hooks, “Is Paris Burning?” (on Bb)
  - Butler, “Gender is Burning” (on Bb)
  - Delany, “Aversion/Perversion/Diversion” (on Bb)
- Watch for next week:
  - Pierce, “Boys Don’t Cry” (1999)

**Week 9: Forgetting and Failing Our Way into the Blue**
- In-class screening:
- Read for next week:
  - Halberstam, “Dude, Where’s My Phallus?” and “The Queer Art of Failure” in *The Queer Art of Failure* (pp. 53-121)
  - Halberstam, “Animating Failure” in *The Queer Art of Failure* (pp. 173-187)
- Watch for next week:

**Week 10: The Final, Stupid Frontier**
- In-class screening:
  - Judge, “Idiocracy” (2006)
- Discussion and Course Survey