

HUM 415 || Contemporary Culture  
Fall 2014

Dr. Robert C. Thomas

Wednesday 7-9:45PM in HUM 408

Office: HUM 416, Office Hour: Wednesday 6-7PM || E-mail: [theory@sfsu.edu](mailto:theory@sfsu.edu)

Office Phone: 415-338-1154 (no voice mail)

Course Website: <http://imaginethepolitical.com/>

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This version of Contemporary Culture is organized under the rubric of imagining the political. If you have no idea what that means, you're not alone. A quick look around confirms that thinking imaginatively or even differently about the political—or even considering doing so—is something seemingly banished from our everyday lives. (By "political" we mean a politics of everyday life in relation to larger social, political, and economic "structures" and mechanisms.) As someone once said: it's easier for us to imagine the end of the world than it is for us to imagine the end of capitalism. So, what kind of system do we have where so much energy is expended on preventing us from even thinking about, let alone imagining, any alternatives to what currently exists? This course poses these and other questions at the intersection of thought, aesthetics, and politics. Rather than definitively answer these questions, the course is intended as a guided study of this problematic in diverse areas—e.g. time, education, and work—and through the example and study of diverse forms of expression, such as music (including file sharing, 8-tracks, and psychedelic children's music), science fiction and horror film, the Situationist International, and contemporary theory and philosophy. As if to demonstrate the efficacy (and, frankly, the lulling seductiveness) of our main thesis, we will spend a great deal of time analyzing dystopian "end of the world," science fiction, and horror film in relation to the historical present. What do these films teach us about contemporary culture? What are these films imagining? We will read difficult work by theorists such as Mark Fisher, Evan Calder Williams, McKenzie Wark, Guy Debord, and Jonathan Crary and study films by Chris Marker, George Romero, Dan O' Bannon, John Carpenter, Frederick Wiseman, and Vincenzo Natali.

### **REQUIRED BOOKS (available at the bookstore):**

Mark Fisher – *Capitalist Realism*

Douglas Lain – *Billy Moon*

Evan Calder Williams – *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*

Mckenzie Wark – *The Spectacle of Disintegration*

Jonathan Crary – *24/7*

**REQUIRED ESSAYS (print, read, bring to class)** Note: "Online" essays are linked in this section of the syllabus on the course website. "Articles" are under the "Articles" tab on the website.

Guy Debord – "The Culmination of Separation" from *Society of the Spectacle* and "Theory of the Dérive"

Hassler-Forest – "Neoliberal Capitalism and the End of the World" from *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age*

Barry Keith Grant – *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology* (selections)

Steven Shaviro – "Splice"

Mckenzie Wark – "The Vectoral Class and Its Antipodes" from *Telesthesia*

Situationist International – "Definitions," "Introduction to the Critique of Urban Geography,"  
"User's Guide to Détournement"  
Research and Destroy – "Communique from an Absent Future"

### **REQUIRED FILMS (shown in class):**

John Carpenter – *They Live* (USA, 1988)  
Russ Forster – *So Wrong, They're Right* (USA, 1995)  
Philip Kaufman – *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (USA, 1978)  
Rob Kuhns – *Birth of the Living Dead* (USA, 2013)  
Chris Marker – *La Jetée* (France, 1962)  
Vincenzo Natali – *Splice* (USA, 2010)  
Dan O' Bannon – *Return of the Living Dead* (USA, 1985)  
George Romero – *Night of the Living Dead* (USA, 1968)  
Frederick Wiseman – *High School* (USA, 1968)

### **ASSIGNMENTS**

Students are responsible for completing all the assigned course work and are expected to regularly attend and participate in course discussions. Reading difficult texts is a major component of this course. If you are not prepared to read and interpret difficult and challenging material, you should not take this course. Students are expected to come to class prepared. That means that you have done the assigned reading, have thought about it, and have something relevant to say. Always bring the assigned reading material (for each particular day) to class. Always take notes. My lectures, comments, and rants constitute an important "text" for the course. Be aware that my style is casual and approachable—this should not detract from the seriousness of the work we do together (this style of presentation is meant to make it easier for you to grasp the material). There will be 2 "formal" papers required (following the requirements for segment III, see below). There will be a mid-term essay 5-pages in length, and a final essay 5-pages in length (typed and double spaced). There will be a handout on the essay assignments two weeks before each essay is due. Each essay must contain 5-pages of formal college level writing. Your essays must demonstrate mastery of the reading material and course lectures for the assignments (your grade will be based on this). All essays must be critical. No grade will be awarded for non-critical writing. No papers will be accepted via e-mail (no exceptions). (Please note that Wikipedia is NOT a critical source and cannot be used for college writing.) No rewrites of written work (no exceptions). No late papers accepted (no exceptions). Plagiarism in any of the course assignments, in any form, will be dealt with harshly and will be forwarded to the Dean's Office for appropriate action. Plagiarism on any assignment will also result in a grade of zero. You must receive a letter grade on all assignments in order to complete the course. Students are responsible for all of the course content and materials even if they are absent (absences of more than two class sessions can result in your final grade being substantially lowered). No incompletes will be given, no exceptions. Please be aware that from time to time I may need to contact you via e-mail. In order to facilitate this, you will need to make sure that your SFSU e-mail account is actively working. I will not send these e-mails to a non-SFSU account (the system is not set up to work that way; I don't have any control over it). It is your responsibility to make sure your account is accessible and working.

Please note that the schedule of papers is clearly listed in the course syllabus. I do my best to hand the papers back as soon as possible. My teaching builds on the work we do over the course of the semester. The schedule of papers (one midterm and one final) is based on this. Please be aware that the midterm papers do, in fact, come back to you in time to make any necessary adjustments for the final paper. (I understand that students prefer to receive feedback earlier in the semester: However,

there are limitations to what can be done given the material I teach and the way I teach it, which builds over time. Please note that the generalized desire for everything to be "instantaneous," which seems to mark the present, is part of what we are analyzing in this course.) The biggest mistake that students make on the midterm is to not actually read the assignment and/or not fully follow the instructions. Additionally, if your paper does not demonstrate that you've read the assigned books, you will be graded down significantly and may not receive a passing grade. Students need to include a S.A.S.E. if they want their final papers returned to them.

**This syllabus is part of the course materials.** You are provided with a copy of the syllabus at the beginning of the semester and are expected to know the information contained within it the same way you are expected to know the information contained in the articles, books, and lectures. I reserve the right to grade you down based on your lack of knowledge of the syllabus and **any other written directions. Refer to the syllabus before asking me questions (that I have already answered in writing).**

### **CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE**

Cell phones are to be turned off in class. If you are caught text messaging in class, surfing the web, or playing video games, or engaging in any other non-course related activity, you will be required to leave the classroom. No eating in class (unless you bring enough to share with everyone). No electronic recording in the classroom.

### **AGREEMENT**

Enrollment in this course constitutes your agreement to abide by all of the above rules and policies.

### **SEGMENT III WRITING REQUIREMENT**

To meet the segment III writing requirement, you will be required to write two five page critical papers. These papers are "formal" and will be read and graded by the professor. You will be expected to argue coherently, to support your arguments with detailed examples from the works analyzed, to edit your papers for spelling, grammar punctuation and agreement, and to meet recognized standards for notes and bibliography when relevant. All of the above will be taken into account in the grading of these assignments.

### **PARTICIPATION**

There may be in-class assignments as part of your participation grade

### **STATEMENT ON DISABILITIES**

Students with disabilities who need reasonable accommodations are encouraged to contact the instructor. The Disability Programs and Resource Center (DPRC) is available to facilitate the reasonable accommodations process. The DPRC is located in the Student Service Building and can be reached by telephone (voice/TTY 415-338-2472) or by email: [dprc@sfsu.edu](mailto:dprc@sfsu.edu), <http://www.sfsu.edu/~dprc/facultyfaq.html#1>

### **GRADING**

Attendance and participation: 10% || Midterm Essay: 40% || Final Essay: 40% || Final Exam: 10%

Films that SFSU does not own will be on reserve at Academic Technology, which is located in Library 85 (on the ground floor). You will have to ask for the DVD's listed under my name. They will be placed on reserve after the films are shown in class. <http://www.sfsu.edu/~avitv/>

TENTATIVE COURSE SCHEDULE FALL 2014  
(Instructor Reserves the Right to Modify)

Wk 1.	Aug 27	Introduction and handout of course material
Wk 2.	Sep 3	Barry Keith Grant, <i>Film Genre</i> 1-55 Film – <i>Night of the Living Dead</i>
Wk. 3	Sep 10	No Class Instructor Illness
Wk. 4.	Sep 17	Ben Hervey, <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> 7-30, 116-121 Film - <i>Birth of the Living Dead</i>
Wk. 5	Sep 24	Evan Calder Williams, <i>Combined and Uneven Apocalypse</i> 72-93, 102-131; Hassler-Forest “Neoliberal Capitalism and the End of the World” Film – <i>Return of the Living Dead</i>
Wk 6.	Oct 1	Evan Calder Williams, <i>Combined and Uneven Apocalypse</i> 1-61 Film – <i>So Wrong, They're Right</i>
Wk. 7.	Oct 8	Mark Fisher, <i>Capitalist Realism</i> Film – <i>High School</i>
Wk. 8.	Oct 15	<b>First Essay Prompt Handed Out</b> Research and Destroy “Communicate from an Absent Future” Jonathan Crary, <i>24/7</i>
Wk. 9.	Oct 22	Jonathan Crary, <i>24/7</i> Deleuze "Postscript on Control Societies" Film – <i>La Jetée</i>
Wk.10.	Oct 29	<b>First Paper Due</b> Film – <i>Splice</i> Steven Shaviro "Splice"
Wk 11.	Nov 5	Guy Debord, <i>Society of the Spectacle</i> (Chapter 1) Film – <i>Diary of the Dead</i> Continued
Wk 12.	Nov 12	S.I. “Definitions” “Introduction to the Critique of Urban Geography,” Debord – “Theory of the Dérive” McKenzie Wark, <i>The Spectacle of Disintegration</i> 1-20
Wk. 13.	Nov 19	<b>Final Essay Prompt Handed Out</b> McKenzie Wark, <i>The Spectacle of Disintegration</i> 49-83 Film – <i>They Live</i>

Wk. 14.	Nov 26	<b>Thanksgiving Break – No Class</b>
Wk. 15.	Dec 3	McKenzie Wark, <i>The Spectacle of Disintegration</i> 123-156, 181-204 McKenzie Wark, “The Vectoral Class and Its Antipodes” from <i>Telesthesia</i>
Wk 16.	Dec 10	Douglas Lain, <i>Billy Moon</i>
	Dec 17	<b>Final Paper Due @ 7PM</b> <b>Final Exam @ 7:10PM</b>