

HUM 415 || Contemporary Culture

Fall 2013

Dr. Robert C. Thomas

T/TH 9:35 – 10:50 a.m. in HUM 408

Office: HUM 416, Office Hour: Tuesdays 11 - 12 || E-mail: theory@sfsu.edu

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

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

Course Description

Watching *Children of Men*, we are inevitably reminded of the phrase attributed to Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. That slogan captures precisely what I mean by 'capitalist realism': the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to even imagine a coherent alternative to it. Once, dystopian films and novels were exercises in such acts of imagination—the disasters they depicted acting as a narrative pretext for the emergence of different ways of living. Not so with *Children of Men*. The world that it projects seems more like an extrapolation or exacerbation of ours than an alternative to it. In its world, as in ours, ultra-authoritarianism and Capital are by no means incompatible: internment camps and franchise coffee bars co-exist . . . The catastrophe in *Children of Men* is neither waiting down the road, nor has it already happened. Rather, it is being lived through—Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*

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. 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 capitalism, the economy, and corporatism? 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 Nagisa Oshima, Chris Marker, George Romero, Dan O' Bannon, John Carpenter, Frederick Wiseman, and Vincenzo Natali.

Required Books (available at the bookstore):

- Mark Fisher – *Capitalist Realism*
- 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.

- Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, "Postulates of Linguistics" from *A Thousand Plateaus*
- Guy Debord – ["The Culmination of Separation"](#) from *Society of the Spectacle*
- Guy Debord – ["Theory of the Dérive"](#)
- Hassler-Forest – “Neoliberal Capitalism and the End of the World” from *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age*
- Kafka – "Report to an Academy"
- Nagisa Oshima – *Cinema, Censorship, and the State* (selections)
- McKenzie Wark – “The Vectoral Class and Its Antipodes” from *Telesthesia*
- Situationist International – ["Definitions"](#)
- Situationist International – ["Introduction to the Critique of Urban Geography"](#)
- 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)
- Richard Lester – *The Bed-Sitting Room* (UK, 1968)
- Chris Marker – *La Jetée* (France, 1962)
- Oshima Nagisa – *Tōkyō sensō sengo hiwa (The Man Who Left His Will on Film aka)* (Japan, 1970)
- Oshima Nagisa – *Kōshikei (Death by Hanging)* (Japan, 1968)
- 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. 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. 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.

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, <http://www.sfsu.edu/~dprc/facultyfaq.html#1>

GRADING

Attendance and participation: 10%

Midterm Essay: 40%

Final Essay: 40%

Final Exam: 10%

TENTATIVE COURSE SCHEDULE FALL 2013
(Instructor Reserves the Right to Modify)

Wk 1.	Aug 27 Aug 29	Introduction and handout of course material <i>Film Genre</i> 1-55 Film – <i>Night of the Living Dead</i>
Wk 2.	Sep 3. Sep 5.	<i>Combined and Uneven Apocalypse</i> 72-104 Ben Hervey, <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> 7-30, 116-121 Film <i>Return of the Living Dead</i>
Wk. 3	Sep 10 Sep 12	<i>Combined and Uneven Apocalypse</i> 104-148 Hassler-Forest “Neoliberal Capitalism and the End of the World” Continued
Wk. 4.	Sep 17 Sep 19	<i>Combined and Uneven Apocalypse</i> 1-44 Film – <i>So Wrong, They're Right</i> Continued
Wk. 5	Sep 24 Sep 26	<i>Combined and Uneven Apocalypse</i> 45-71 Film – <i>The Bed-Sitting Room</i> Continued
Wk 6.	Oct 1 Oct 3	<i>Capitalist Realism</i> Film – <i>High School</i>
Wk. 7.	Oct 8. Oct 10.	Research and Destroy “ Communique from an Absent Future ” Continued
Wk. 8.	Oct 15 Oct 17	Continued Deleuze “ Postscript on Control Societies ”
Wk. 9.	Oct 22 Oct 24	Film – <i>Diary of the Dead</i> Continued
Wk.10.	Oct 29 Oct 31	Film – <i>Splice</i> Shaviro “ Splice ”
Wk 11.	Nov 5 Nov 7	Shaviro “ Splice ” Debord <i>Society of the Spectacle</i> (Chapter 1) S.I. “ Definitions ” “ Introduction to the Critique of Urban Geography ” Debord – “ Theory of the Dérive ”
Wk 12.	Nov 12 Nov 14	Wark <i>The Spectacle of Disintegration</i> 1-20, 49-83, Film – <i>They Live</i>
Wk. 13.	Nov 19 Nov 21	Wark <i>The Spectacle of Disintegration</i> 123-156, 181-204 Deleuze “ Postscript on Control Societies ”

Work "The Vectoral Class and Its Antipodes" from *Telesthesia*
(optional)

Wk. 14.	Nov 26 Nov 28	Thanksgiving Break Thanksgiving Break
Wk. 15.	Dec 3 Dec 5	D&G "Postulates of Linguistics" Kafka "Report to an Academy" Continued
Wk. 16.	Dec 10 Dec 12	Crary, <i>24/7</i> Film – <i>La Jetée</i> Continued
	Dec 17	Final Paper Due @ 9:35 a.m. Final Exam @ 9:40 a.m.