

Course Title: *Artificial Intelligence in Science Fiction Film*

Instructor: Mike Kleyman

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Office Hours: Wednesdays 3-4pm and by appointment.

Office Hours Zoom link: [OH Zoom](#)

Long before professors were worried about students handing in AI-written essays, filmmakers were exploring what Artificial Intelligence might look like, how we'd engage with it, and whether or not it would end up destroying the world.

This course will explore how film has represented AI over the last 100 years or so.

We'll cover some of the most popular and influential films, including *Terminator 2*, *The Matrix*, and *Blade Runner*. As we do so, we'll investigate how film has shaped our understanding of artificial intelligence. We'll have a set of guiding questions as we move through the films: what anxiety about AI is each film trying to represent? Do these films *really* care about AI, or is AI just a stand-in for some other threat? Why are nearly all films about AI so pessimistic?

In addition to the films, we'll occasionally have a reading (short fiction, news articles, etc.), but this will always be quite short. You will also be asked to write a short (250-word) reflection piece about a film and upload it to our class site once a week. These reflections are fairly informal and are primarily a way for you to organize your thoughts on the material before class. There will be one final paper, and there will also be short (1-2 page) assignments that ask you to analyze a specific scene from a film. Class time will be set aside for us to discuss and improve your writing, and you will have the chance to resubmit your writing for a higher grade if you wish.

Here are my hopes for this class:

1. That I can introduce you to a few of the masterworks of American sci-fi film.
2. That you will develop your ability to analyze how films work.
3. That you will find or sharpen your own writing style and voice.
4. That we can have some interesting discussions about artificial intelligence--both how it's been represented in film and how it's beginning to function in the world.
5. That you'll enjoy (or at least find interesting) the work of watching, discussing, and writing about film.

List of Films:

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)

Alien (1979)

Blade Runner (1982)

Robocop (1987)

Terminator 2: Judgment Day (1991)

The Matrix (1999)

Minority Report (2002)

Her (2013)

Ex Machina (2015)

Blade Runner 2049 (2017)

The Beast (2023)*

ASSIGNMENTS

Weekly response posts: These are not formal academic writing assignments and should only be one to two paragraphs in length. The idea is for you to organize and share your thoughts on course materials ahead of class. Some productive ways to use these posts: ask some preliminary questions about the film; point out connections you find between the film and our secondary readings/other films/class discussions; identify a scene or aspect of the film that you found strange or intriguing. Posts submitted on time that show time and effort will receive full credit. **Each post must be submitted before the class in which we discuss the film you write about.**

Short essays: These *are* formal academic writing assignments. There will be three of these spaced out over the span of the course. You will be asked to choose a specific scene from the week's films and offer a "close reading" of it, analyzing how its visual, auditory, and narrative elements work to create meaning. If you haven't done close reading yet (or recently), don't worry: we will have ample class time set aside to discuss, practice, and refine your close reading skills. Each of these should only be 1 page long. **Note: I will drop the lowest of your three grades, but you must still complete all three papers.**

Final paper: You will craft a 7–8-page research essay that incorporates close readings of our texts and analysis of secondary sources. You will get a formal assignment with prompts and guidelines later. Something important to consider: it is perfectly acceptable for you to use what you've already written for your close reading papers in this final paper, so long as it is relevant to your argument and it feels that the pre-written portions are integrated smoothly into the paper. **Note: you will have the opportunity to submit a rough draft or portion of the paper to me for comments and guidance before the deadline.**

GRADING

Participation: 15%
Response Posts: 15%
Short Essays: 30%
Final Paper: 40%

ATTENDANCE AND ABSENCES

You're expected to come to—and participate in—every class. After one unexcused absence, your overall grade will be lowered by one-third of a letter grade for each subsequent unexcused absence (an A becomes an A-, an A- becomes a B+, etc.).

That being said: if you are feeling sick or something comes up that requires you to miss a class, just let me know ahead of time, and it won't be a problem.

If you have athletic, religious, or other commitments that will cause you to miss multiple classes, speak to me at the start of the semester.

These classes can only work if everyone watches/reads the assigned material before class. If it becomes evident during class that you didn't do the viewing/reading, it will affect your participation grade significantly—you cannot meaningfully participate in the discussion or the work without doing the viewing/reading.

One important note for the Zoom version of this course: having your camera on is absolutely mandatory.

OFFICE HOURS POLICY

I of course encourage you to meet with me for office hours as often as you like. Even if you just want to talk briefly about a text, ask questions about an assignment, or talk about writing in general, I'm always happy to meet.

In the interest of helping students over the initial hurdle of actually coming to office hours, I ask that **you come to office hours at least once before 5/27**. This is a mandatory component of the class. Beyond that, whether you come to OH or not is up to you.

LATE WORK

One third of a letter grade off for each day a paper is late. In other words, what would have been an A becomes an A-, what would have been an A- becomes a B+, etc.

If you realize in advance you're going to struggle to turn in the midterm or final on time, please **reach out at least 24 hours before the deadline so that we can arrange an extension.**

Because posts are designed to structure our class discussion, they must be completed before class; no credit for late posts.

READINGS AND FILMS

All readings and films will be posted to our course site.

Course Calendar (subject to change).

Week 0

- 5/14: Syllabus, class expectations, intro to film analysis.

Week 1: Bad Robots

- 5/18: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) - Stanley Kubrick
 - Truffaut - "What Do Critics Dream About?"
- 5/19: Close Reading Workshop: we will write most of your first close reading papers in class.
- 5/21: *Alien* (1979) - Ridley Scott
 - Darko Suvin - "Estrangement and Cognition"
- 5/22: **First close reading paper (1 page) due by midnight.**

Week 2: AI Overlords

- 5/25: **NO CLASS.**
- 5/26: *T2: Judgment Day* (1991) - James Cameron
 - Reading: Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster"
- 5/28: *The Matrix* (1999) - Lana and Lilly Wachowski

Week 3: YOU ARE UNDER ARREST

- 6/1: **NO CLASS:** Use this time to watch Robocop + Write your second short papers.
- 6/2: *Robocop* (1987) - Paul Verhoeven
 - ASH Guest Lecture
- 6/4: *Minority Report* (2002) - Steven Spielberg
 - Deleuze, "Post-script on societies of control"
 - CH Guest Lecture
- 6/5: **Second close reading paper (1 page) due by midnight.**

Week 4: Blade Runner Then and Now

- 6/8: TBD: in class exercise.
- 6/9* *Blade Runner* (1982) - Ridley Scott
 - KC Guest Lecture
- 6/11 *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) - Denis Villeneuve

Week 5: Love or Chatbot?

- 6/15: *Her* (2013) - Spike Jonze
 - Reading: "Your AI Lover Will Change You"
- 6/16: **Optional:** In-class writing workshop (Close readings or final papers)
- 6/18: *Ex Machina* (2014) - Alex Garland

- 6/19: Third close reading paper (1 page) due by midnight.

Week 6

- 6/22
 - Final Film of the your Choice (ranked choice voting)
 - A) *Wall-E* (2008) - Andrew Stanton
 - B) *The Beast* (2023) - Bertrand Bonello
 - C) your suggestions.
- 6/24: FINAL PAPERS DUE AT MIDNIGHT

PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism is expressly prohibited at Duke. If there are any doubts about documentation standards, please be in touch with me directly before submitting your work. To quote the *Duke Community Standard in Practice*:

“Plagiarism” occurs when a student, with intent to deceive or with disregard for proper scholarly procedures, presents any information, ideas, or phrasing of another as if they were the student’s own and/or does not give appropriate credit to the original source. Proper scholarly procedures require that all quoted material be identified by quotation marks or indentation on the page, and the source of information and ideas, if from another, must be identified and be attributed to that source. Students are responsible for learning proper scholarly procedures.

Here are some examples of plagiarism:

Copying and pasting text without citation – Using someone else’s words verbatim without giving credit.

Paraphrasing without acknowledgment – Rewriting someone else’s ideas in your own words but failing to cite the source.

Self-plagiarism – Reusing your own previously submitted work without permission or proper disclosure.

Using AI-generated content without attribution (if disallowed) – Submitting machine-generated text as your own without following institutional guidelines.

Citing incorrect or fabricated sources – Making up sources or misrepresenting where information came from.

Full plagiarism policies can be found here: <https://library.duke.edu/research/plagiarism>

DISABILITY AND ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

The following statement is taken from the Trinity College of Arts & Sciences website and represents the University’s policy on accommodations for disabilities.

Duke University is prepared to make reasonable academic adjustments and accommodations to allow students with documented disabilities full participation in the same programs and activities available to students without disabilities. Documentation is established through the Disability Management Service / Student Access Office, which is responsible for determining eligibility for accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act, informing a student's academic dean and instructors of the need for accommodation, and providing guidelines for working with a student with a recognized disability. The Program Coordinator works with instructors and students to meet the documented need for accommodation.

If you are a student with a disability and need accommodations for this class, it is your responsibility to register with the Student Disability Access Office (SDAO) and provide them with documentation of your disability. SDAO will work with you to determine what accommodations are appropriate for your situation. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and disability accommodations cannot be provided until a Faculty Accommodation Letter has been given to me. Please contact SDAO for more information: sdao@duke.edu or <https://access.duke.edu/>

RELIGIOUS ACCOMMODATIONS

The following statement represents the University's policy on accommodations for religious observances:

Students are permitted by university policy to be absent from class to observe a religious holiday. Accordingly, Trinity College of Arts & Sciences and the Pratt School of Engineering have established procedures to be followed by students for notifying their instructors of an absence necessitated by the observance of a religious holiday. Please submit requests for religious accommodations at the beginning of the semester so that we can work to make suitable arrangements well ahead of time. You can find the policy and relevant notification form here: <https://trinity.duke.edu/undergraduate/academic-policies/religious-holidays>