

## HUM 415 Contemporary Culture

Dr. Robert C. Thomas

Fall 2016

Tuesday/Thursday, 9:35 – 10:50 AM in HUM 408

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Office HUM 416, Office Hour: Tuesday 10:50 – 11:50 AM

Course Website: <http://apocalypso.io/>

### Course Description

Apocalypse, and its imagination, has become part of our everyday cultural lives. From dystopian science fiction teen potboilers on the CW to contemporary social theory, to the hottest television shows and the latest blockbusters, apocalypse seems to be in the air. What is this all about? What, for example, do zombies teach us about where we are today? And what do these various imaginings of the end of the world mean as we face the threat of global warming and, ultimately, extinction? This course explores the larger social, political, and aesthetic issues that surround our apocalyptic imagination as it relates to the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, or what Donna Haraway has named the Cthuluscene (after a species of spider, not the monster from Lovecraft). And it does so across global cultures. Moreover, the form of these aesthetic engagements with the present will also be compared with a form that many of us likely think has nothing to do with dystopian horror and science fiction films, but which, surprisingly, informs and inflects the genre: melodrama. The concept of melodrama as a genre classification has been expanded in recent years by feminist scholarship, pointing to its connections to noir and the women's picture. Indeed, melodramas were originally films that consisted of dastardly criminals with bushy mustaches tying women to train tracks: the first action films! The pairing of the two terms, melodrama and apocalypse, is meant as a provocation, a challenge, to traditional genre categorizations (which were just made up in the first place, largely in the 1970's). Moreover, when we look at the breadth of films that could be classified under this mashup of genre styles that we often think don't belong together, but surprisingly do in strange and compelling ways, we begin to realize there may be more to this story. In the end, as it were, I think this combination of forms provides a good ground for us to explore larger questions related to horror and philosophy, apocalypse, dystopia, class, science fiction, race, the Anthropocene, gender, social theory and the unique form of cinema.

### Books (available at the bookstore)

- Junji Ito, *Uzumaki* (3 in 1 volume)
- Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times*
- Tony Williams, *John Woo's Bullet in the Head*

### Essays (available on the course website)

- Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (selections)
- Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (selections)
- Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (selection)
- Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury"
- Todd Haynes/Larry Gross, "Antobodies: Larry Gross talks with *Safe's* Todd Haynes"
- Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Cthulucene: Making Kin"
- Mercer & Shingler, *Melodrama* (selections)
- Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet: The Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1* (selections)

- Robert Thomas, “A Cinema of Failed Encounters” excerpt from *Broken: Thought-Images of Life in the State of Exception*
- Evan Calder Williams, “An End Without End”
- Evan Calder Williams, “Introduction,” “Salvage Punk” “Plague in the Gears” from *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*
- William Brown, “Mad Ma(r)x: The Furious Return”
- McKenzie Wark “Fury Road”
- Adrian Martin, “Sandpiercer”
- Kristin Thompson, “The Waning Thrills of CGI”

### Films (shown in class)

- Alfonso Cuarón – *Children of Men* (UK/USA, 2006)
- Todd Haynes – *Safe* (USA, 1995)
- Higuchinski – *Uzumaki* (Japan, 2000)
- Bong Joon-Ho – *Snowpiercer* (South Korea, 2014)
- Rob Kuhns – *Birth of the Living Dead* (USA, 2003)
- Chris Marker – *La Jetee* (short) (France, 1962)
- Tsai Ming-Liang – *The Hole (Dong)* (Taiwan, 1999)
- George Romero – *Night of the Living Dead* (USA, 1968)
- Brian Trenchard-Smith – *Dead End Drive-In* (Australia, 1986)
- John Woo – *Bullet in the Head* (Hong Kong, 1990)
- Euros Lyn – “*Fifteen Million Merits*” from *Black Mirror* (UK, 2011)

I am willing to revise the syllabus to include or incorporate any of the following films based on student input:

- Jim Jarmusch – *Only Lovers Left Alive*
- Phillip Kaufman – *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*
- Richard Kelly – *Southland Tales*
- David Lynch – *Eraserhead*
- Fassbinder – *World on a Wire*
- Lars Von Trier – *Melancholia*
- Abel Ferrara – *4:44: Last Night on Earth*
- Tsai Ming-Liang – *Stray Dogs*

### 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. (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. I've noticed this, especially, over the past few years in my courses.) 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. (self addressed stamped envelope) 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).**

No electronic devices allowed in the classroom. 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.

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%

TENTATIVE COURSE SCHEDULE FALL 2016  
(Instructor Reserves the Right to Modify)

Wk 1.	AUG 25	Introduction and handout of course material
Wk 2.	AUG 30 SEP 1	Film – <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i> Film – <i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i>
Wk. 3	SEP 6  SEP 8	Read: selection of short, critical, pieces on <i>Fury Road</i> William Brown, “Mad Ma(ε)x: The Furious Return,” McKenzie Wark “Fury Road,” Adrian Martin, “Sandpiercer,” Kristin Thompson, “The Waning Thrills of CGI” Mark Fisher, <i>Capitalist Realism</i>
Wk. 4.	SEP 13  SEP 15	Film – <i>Snowpiercer</i> or <i>Children of Men</i> Mark Fisher, <i>Capitalist Realism</i> (continued) Mark Fisher, <i>Capitalist Realism</i> (continued)
Wk. 5	SEP 20 SEP 22	Film – <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> Evan Calder Williams, <i>Combined and Uneven Apocalypse</i> 72-118
Wk 6.	SEP 27  SEP 29	<b>Midterm Paper Prompt Handed Out</b> Film – <i>Birth of the Living Dead</i> Evan Calder Williams, <i>Combined and Uneven Apocalypse</i> 1-71 or “End Without End”
Wk. 7.	OCT 4  OCT 6	Introduction to Melodrama Thomas Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” Mercer & Shingler, <i>Melodrama</i> 1-37 Film – <i>Written on the Wind</i> Continued (bring all readings)
Wk. 8.	OCT 11  OCT 13	Tony Williams, <i>John Woo’s Bullet in the Head</i> Film – <i>Bullet in the Head</i> Continued (bring all readings)
Wk. 9.	OCT 18  OCT 20	<b>Midterm Paper Due</b> “Antibodies: Larry Gross talks with <i>Safe</i> ’s Todd Haynes” Film – <i>Safe</i> Continued (bring all readings)
Wk. 10.	OCT 25  OCT 27	Ito, <i>Uzumaki</i> (3 in 1 Volume) Eugene Thacker, <i>In the Dust of this Planet</i> 1-9 (required) 49-97 (optional) Film – <i>Uzumaki</i> Continued (bring all readings)

Wk.11.	NOV 1	Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin”
	NOV 3	Guy Debord, <i>Society of the Spectacle</i> (selection)
Wk 12.	NOV 8	Film – <i>Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story</i>
	NOV 10	Thomas, “Persistence of the Spectacle”
Wk 13.	NOV 15	Film – <i>The Hole</i>
		Read: “Cinema of Failed Encounters” by Thomas
	NOV 17	Continued (bring all readings)
Wk. 14.	NOV 22-24	<b>Thanksgiving Break — No Class</b>
Wk. 15.	NOV 29	<b>Final Paper Prompt Handed Out</b>
		Stengers, <i>In Catastrophic Times</i>
	DEC 1	Stengers, <i>In Catastrophic Times</i>
Wk. 16.	DEC 6	Jonathan Crary, <i>24/7</i> (selections)
		Short film – <i>La Jette</i>
		Television Episode – “Fifteen Million Merits” from <i>Black Mirror</i>
	DEC 8	Continued (bring all readings)
Wk. 17.	DEC 13	Final Class Review
	DEC 15	<b>Final Paper Due @</b>
		<b>Final Exam @</b>