

# UTOPIAS

CTCS 411: Film, Television, and Culture Studies

Fridays 10:00 am–1:50 pm  
Room SCA 316

Professor Jennifer Lynn Peterson

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Course Catalogue Description: Detailed examination of film/television from the perspectives and insights of Cultural Studies; focus on the production and reception of cultural texts, practices, and communities.

Detailed Description: This course is an introduction to the concept of utopia in culture. While dystopia and apocalypse have become key themes of our time, we will trace the potential and limitations of utopia as a counterforce, from modernist technological utopias to post-1960s ecological, feminist, and Black utopias to contemporary efforts to imagine radically different futures. By looking at examples from film history – as well as art, literature, TV, and other forms of media – we will explore utopia as a set of representations, ideals, and practices. We will consider the genres of utopia (science fiction, fantasy, documentary), utopian spaces (cities, gardens, islands), utopian politics, intentional communities, and the utopian role of art. Despite its non-existence, utopia can be understood as a tool for conjuring better worlds in the face of injustice, economic precarity, environmental crisis, and rapid technological change. Readings will include Thomas More's *Utopia* and theorizations by Lewis Mumford, Michel Foucault, Audre Lorde, Fredric Jameson, and others.

## REQUIRED BOOKS:

- Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516)
- Gregory Claeys, *Utopia: The History of an Idea* (2020)
- Keith M. Johnston, *Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction* (2011)

→ All other articles, media clips, and additional course materials will be posted on Brightspace.

# COURSE SCHEDULE

## PART I: REPRESENTATIONS

### **Week 1 – Introduction: Good Places, Bad Places, and Noplace**

Read: Thomas More, *Utopia*

Claeys, *Utopia*, Introduction

January 17: Watch *Castle in the Sky* (Hayao Miyazaki, 1986), 124 min.

[Sign up for in-class presentations](#)

### **Week 2 – Utopia, Film, and History**

**First response due by Thursday 1/23 (post on Brightspace)**

Read: Claeys, *Utopia*, Chapters 1-4

Peter Fitting, “What Is Utopian Film? An Introductory Taxonomy” (pdf)

January 24: Watch clip from *Things to Come* (William Cameron Menzies, 1936)

*Lost Horizon* (Frank Capra, 1937), 132 min.

### **Week 3 – Science Fiction Film**

Read: Claeys, *Utopia*, Chapters 5-6, 12, and 14

Johnston, *Science Fiction Film*, Part I

January 31: Watch *The Impossible Voyage* (Georges Melies, 1904), 20 min.

*Aelita: Queen of Mars* (Yakov Protazanov, 1924), 101 min.

### **Week 4 – Mid-Century Modern: Capitalist Utopia/Dystopia**

**Second response due by Thursday 2/6 (post on Brightspace)**

Read: Claeys, *Utopia*, Chapters 7, 11, and 13

Raymond Williams, “Culture” (pdf)

February 7: Watch *Design for Dreaming* (Victor Solow, 1956), 9 min.

*American Look* (Jam Handy, 1958), 28 min.

*Star Trek* original series, “Mirror, Mirror” (Marc Daniels, 1967), 50 min.

### **Week 5 – Climate/Coloniality/Dystopia**

Read: Johnson, *Science Fiction Film*, Part II

Lisa Garforth, “Introduction” to *Green Utopias: Environmental Hope Before and After Nature* (pdf)

February 14: Watch clips from *Soylent Green* (Richard Fleischer, 1973), *Logan’s Run* (Michael Anderson, 1976)

*District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009), 112 min.

## PART II: PRACTICES

### **Week 6 – Utopian Cities**

**Third response due by Thursday 2/20 (post on Brightspace)**

Read: Claeys, *Utopia*, Chapter 8

Lewis Mumford, “Utopia, the City, and the Machine” (pdf)

February 21: Watch clip from *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927),

clip from *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018)

*The City* (Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, 1939), 43 min.

[Midterm paper assignment distributed in class](#)

### **Week 7 – Utopias of Nature**

Read: Michel Foucault, “Heterotopias” (pdf)

William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness” (pdf)

February 28: Watch *Land of the Lofty Mountains* (National Park Service, 1936), 10 min.  
*Sweetgrass* (Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, 2009), 101 min.

### **Week 8 – Intentional Communities**

***Due in class: midterm paper***

Read: Claeys, *Utopia*, Chapters 9-10

March 7: Watch clip from *Drop City* (Joan Grossman, 2012)

*The Land of the Giants* (Civilian Conservation Corps film, 1935), 24 min.

*Our Daily Bread* (King Vidor, 1934), 80 min.

### **Week 9 – Feminist Utopias**

Read: Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) (pdf)

Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1979) (pdf)

March 14: Watch *Women I Love* (Barbara Hammer, 1976), 23 min.

*Born in Flames* (Lizzie Borden, 1983), 90 min.

### **MARCH 17-21 – SPRING BREAK – NO CLASS ON FRIDAY MARCH 21**

### **Week 10 – Afrofuturist Utopias**

***Fourth response due by Thursday 3/28 (post on Brightspace)***

Read: Jayna Brown, Introduction to *Black Utopias* (pdf)

March 28: Watch *Black Journal: Alice Coltrane* (Stan Lathan, 1970), 15 min.

*Space is the Place* (John Coney, 1974), 85 min.

***Final paper assignment distributed in class***

## **PART III: POLITICS & THEORY**

### **Week 11 – Utopian Manifestoes**

Read: Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789), Port Huron Statement, selections (1962), Black Panther Party Platform and Program (1966), Third Cinema Manifesto (1969)

April 4: Instructor out of town for SCMS conference – class will be led by TA.

Watch *The Hour of the Furnaces*, Part I (Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, 1971), 90 min.

### **WEEK 12 – The Politics of Utopia**

***Fifth response due by Thursday 4/10 (post on Brightspace)***

Read: Fredric Jameson, “The Politics of Utopia” (pdf)

April 11: Watch *Vidas Secas* (Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1963), 100 min.

### **WEEK 13 – Activism, Apocalypse, and Dystopia**

***Final paper proposal due – email to instructor by 4/17 at noon***

Read: David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth* (2019), selections

April 18: Watch *Night Moves* (Kelly Reichardt, 2013), 113 min.

### **WEEK 14 – Green Utopias Now**

***Sixth response due by Thursday 4/24 (post on Brightspace)***

Read: Johnson, *Science Fiction Film*, Part III

Lisa Garforth, “No Future: Green Utopias Between Apocalypse and Adaptation” (pdf)

April 25: Watch *The Wild Robot* (Chris Sanders, 2024), 102 min.

### **WEEK 15 – Futurity: Utopia is not a destination but a direction**

Read: Scott MacDonald, “Toward an Eco-Cinema” (pdf)

May 2: Wrap-up. Discuss Final Projects.

Watch experimental short films: *Pilgrim* (Cauleen Smith, 2017), 8 min., *Last Things* (Deborah Stratman, 2023), 50 min.

**FINAL RESEARCH PAPER: Due Friday May 6**

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### **ASSIGNMENTS: GRADE BREAKDOWN**

- Six short responses (posted on Brightspace) – 5% each (30% total)
- One in-class presentation (on a course reading) – 15%
- Midterm paper – 20%
- Final paper – 30%
- Attendance and participation – 5%

### **COURSE STRUCTURE AND REQUIREMENTS**

This is a discussion-oriented seminar aimed at introducing advanced undergraduates and graduate students to major topics in cultural studies and media studies. Through a sustained process of reading, watching, thinking, talking, and writing about utopia, students will gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which cinema and media shape our sense of what is good and possible in the world, pushing against the grain of all that is bad and dystopian in the world. The success of this course depends on regular student participation both inside and outside the classroom. Weekly in-person class sessions will consist of discussion, short lectures, student presentations, and screenings of films or other media content. We will take a short (10-minute) break during each class meeting.

The goal of our in-class meetings is to generate productive, lively, and challenging discussions. As such, you must be sure to attend each class meeting and participate in class discussions. Outside readings are a crucial part of the course. Students are responsible for keeping up with the readings and participating in discussions. Participation is part of your course grade. If you miss more than one class, please consult with the instructor or the TA.

### **READINGS AND SCREENINGS**

Readings are to be done on your own time before our Friday class meetings. Make sure you arrive prepared, having digested the readings and marked them up with notes. For each reading, you should be able to state the main argument as well as any secondary arguments. We will be asking of each reading: How persuasive is this argument? What methodology is the author using? How is this work situated in a larger field of study? What evidence is the author working with to support their claims? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this piece? Screenings will be done in class, unless we start to run out of time, in which case you may have to watch some materials on your own.

### **IN-CLASS PRESENTATION**

Each student will give an in-class presentation on one of the assigned course readings. Your job is to introduce the course reading for that week. You don't have to cover everything; I will follow up with more context. But you do need to come to class prepared with a short summary of the essay or chapter(s) – content, main argument, and historical or cultural context – as well as one discussion question for the class. After your presentation, you will submit your notes to me in written form. You are not required to prepare any slides or media for this presentation, but you may if you wish. (If you show a clip, keep it under 3 minutes.) Your presentation should last about 10 minutes (15 minutes max). (worth 15% of grade)

### **SIX SHORT RESPONSES**

Each student will write six short responses (250 words or more) to the previous week's course materials (film + readings). You will post these on Brightspace the Thursday before our class meeting, every other week. The goal of this assignment is for students to push beyond their first instinctive response to a film and develop a more nuanced appraisal informed by the set of ideas we are discussing in the course (worth 5% each for a total of 30% of final grade)

## **FINAL PAPER**

Write a final research paper of 8-10 pages. Students will be able to write about a film or films of their own choosing and develop their own approach. Students will pitch their final paper ideas to instructor in a short typewritten proposal due week 13; topics must be approved before proceeding. Further assignment details to come. (worth 30% of grade)

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## **DEPARTMENT AND UNIVERSITY POLICIES AND PROTOCOLS**

### **Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems**

#### **Academic Conduct:**

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” [policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b](https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, [policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct](https://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct).

#### **Class Recordings:**

With online course content, it is the student’s responsibility to comply with the use and handling of course-related recordings under existing SCampus policies regarding class notes (<https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-c/>). Students are not permitted to create their own class recordings without the instructor’s permission. Violations of these policies will be met with the appropriate disciplinary sanction.

#### **Support Systems:**

*Student Health Counseling Services* - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call [engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling](https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling)  
Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

*Student Health Leave Coordinator* – 213-821-4710 Located in the USC Support and Advocacy office, the Health Leave Coordinator processes requests for health leaves of absence and advocates for students taking such leaves when needed. <https://policy.usc.edu/student-health-leave-absence/>

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline* - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org) Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP)* - (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call [engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp](https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp) Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) | Title IX* - (213) 740-5086 [equity.usc.edu](https://equity.usc.edu), [titleix.usc.edu](https://titleix.usc.edu)

Information about how to get help or help a survivor of harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following protected characteristics: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations.

*Bias Assessment Response and Support* - (213) 740-2421 [studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support](https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support)  
Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions for appropriate investigation and response.

*USC Office of Student Accessibility Services* - (213) 740-0776 [osasfrontdesk@usc.edu](mailto:osasfrontdesk@usc.edu)

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

*USC Support and Advocacy* - (213) 821-4710 [studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa) Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

**Diversity and Inclusion:**

Diversity and Inclusion are foundational to the SCA community. We are committed to fostering a welcoming and supportive environment where students of all identities and backgrounds can flourish. The classroom should be a space for open discussion of ideas and self-expression; however, SCA will not tolerate verbal or written abuse, threats, harassment, intimidation or violence against person or property. If students are concerned about these matters in the classroom setting they are encouraged to contact their SCA Diversity and Inclusion Liaison, <http://cinema.usc.edu/about/diversity.cfm>; e-mail [diversity@cinema.usc.edu](mailto:diversity@cinema.usc.edu). You can also report discrimination based on a protected class here <https://equity.usc.edu/harassment-or-discrimination/> *Diversity at USC* - (213) 740-2101. Consult [diversity.usc.edu](http://diversity.usc.edu) for Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

**Disruptive Student Behavior:**

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students' ability to learn and an instructor's ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.

**Emergency and Safety Contacts:**

*USC Emergency* - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call [dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu), [emergency.usc.edu](http://emergency.usc.edu)  
*USC Department of Public Safety* - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call [dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu) for non-emergency assistance or information.

–Syllabus updated 1.18.2025