

Piedmont Project Syllabus
Ryan Cook, Film and East Asian Studies, August 2015, “Film and Environment”

Film and Media Studies 373 (Cross-Listed with Environmental Science)
“Film and Environment”

Ryan Cook
Emory University, Spring 2016

Meetings: MoWe 10:00-11:15am
Screenings: We 5:00-7:30pm (White Hall 205)

Introductory Statement:

This course has roots in several projects that I previously undertook related to the 2011 earthquake, tsunami and subsequent nuclear meltdown in Japan’s Tohoku region. These included several talks and papers, and a course I taught in the fall of 2014 at Emory on representations of Japan’s triple-disaster in film and media. As a Japanese film and culture specialist, and someone who was living in Japan at the time of the disasters (having previously lived in the disaster zone itself), I first came to this subject with rather field-specific and personal interests. But with time my thinking especially about issues surrounding the Fukushima nuclear crisis became more general and systematic. The discourse around Fukushima tended to blur the lines between natural and manmade catastrophes, and to situate an event like 3/11 as an effect both of and upon global systems—ecological, economic, political and so on. My thinking on this also corresponded with what seemed to me to be a large-scale popularization of the concept of the Anthropocene (the idea that around the industrial revolution, if not earlier, the earth entered a new geological era defined by measurable atmospheric changes attributable to human activity)—at least, I was becoming more aware around this time of the growing literature on the Anthropocene and its emphasis on the planetary conditions circumscribing human societies and systems. In the spring of 2015, I took part in a reading group on the Anthropocene at Emory, where I was able to discuss some of this literature with other faculty from a variety of disciplines, and I attended and took part in panels dedicated to the topic at several conferences. I had previously had an interest in media ecology and cybernetic notions of media as related to environments, ideas popularized in the 1960s, and now became interested in linking these media theories to the Anthropocene sense of the environment as a planetary system in crisis. When I heard about the Piedmont Project at Emory, I decided it could be an interesting opportunity to design a course that would examine global environmental issues within a film and media studies framework.

From the Piedmont workshop I gained some basic building blocks for such a course, beginning with sustainability theory, both as a historical development and

as a rubric for understanding all manner of problems as connected to environmental considerations. The workshop also supplied an introduction to core sustainability issues, and a blueprint for my course as it touches environmental problems themselves. These include problems around industrial agriculture, fossil fuel extraction and combustion, coral reef loss and ocean acidification, species extinction, population growth, warming, drought and rising sea levels, and so on. In contrast to the often dire, and abstract, character of the Anthropocene literature, which is not necessarily a literature of sustainability, the workshop often focused on small-scale, local solutions—what can and should be done about the environmental problems we face, and how to live well and in harmony with the environment. I have tried to incorporate this solutions-oriented thinking into my course.

But this course is not only an introduction to sustainability. It is an attempt to rethink humanistic study, and film studies in particular, through the lens of sustainability. As such, the goal is not to treat films simply as transmission vehicles for environmental messages. It covers issues documentaries, for example, but the primary concern will not be content or rhetorical analysis. In addition to political and ethical problems, “ecological” film and media theories are at issue, as are the relationships of aesthetics to environment (from pastoralism and Romantic landscape painting to sculptures made from landfill waste). The point of departure is ecocriticism as a post-“first wave” environmentalist mode of inquiry, one that developed as a sub-field of literary criticism in the 1990s: a way of reading literary texts from environmentalist perspectives while resisting the pastoralism and romanticism of earlier writers and environmentalist movements. Ecocriticism has since been developed as a new pillar of cultural critique, joining established identity politics discourses of race, gender, sexuality and class such that environment can be understood as comparably central to all forms of human cultural production, and even as its own form of identity politics when we consider the field of environmental justice issues, for example.

The course will also address: the “trauma” of climate change and the ways that fiction manages it; problems of scale and slow geological processes as they relate to theories of cinema as a prosthesis to human perception and understanding that may make it possible to visualize what scale renders invisible; questions of the materiality of media themselves and the environmental impacts of our media consumption; problems of affect and the relatability of environmental science (especially as this relates to the will for political action); post-human or non-anthropocentric thinking as it relates to the “mechanical brain” and the indifference of the camera; the ways in which films blur the boundaries between planetary awareness and globalization as a manmade economic system; and the possibilities for moving from a “paranoia” of climate change and environmental disaster toward a melancholic “reparative reading” and love of the planet.

One thing I have struggled with in designing a course that is first and foremost a

film course is what balance to strike between an issues-based approach and a film history or theory approach, especially given my resistance to thinking of film as a transparent delivery system or messaging platform. This problem has been most pronounced in the selection of films. The course does not focus on a genre, or cover any specific period or region, and it is also not a systematic examination of film theory. For the moment, it is an experimental combination of texts and ideas. I expect that after having taught this once, I will have a clearer sense of what it might mean to call “environmental film studies” a disciplinary approach, and of what films themselves best represent the object of study. The reading selection will also take some finalizing before I teach this course in the spring of 2016 as many of the texts may be overly challenging or long for an undergraduate seminar, and I may need additional texts on the specific films and topics in questions. But this should be a good start.

Goals: By the end of this course, students will be familiar with (1) basic principles of sustainability theory and arguments about pressing environmental issues; (2) ecological and environmental theories as they relate to or have been developed through humanistic study broadly, and film and media studies more narrowly; (3) important films that have taken on environmental issues, or that demonstrate how moving images mediate our relationship to environment in rhetorical, aesthetic, philosophical, anthropological, and perceptual ways.

Format: This is a discussion seminar in which your active participation will be expected. We will share the responsibility of presenting and explaining the material we encounter to one another. You will be asked to lead discussions and make presentations over the course, as well as to contribute materials for our consideration.

Assignments

Your final grade will be based on the following:

Attendance and class participation:	30%
Response papers:	15%
Midterm short essay:	10%
Two Presentations:	20%
Final paper/project:	25%

Textbooks

Davis and Turpin, eds., *Art in the Anthropocene*, Open Humanities Press, 2015
[Free Download] (David/Turpin)

Kääpä and Gustafsson, eds., *Transnational Ecocinema: Film Culture in an Era of Ecological Transformation*, Chicago: Intellect, 2013
(Kääpä/Gustafsson)

Narine, *Eco-Trauma Cinema*, Routledge, 2015 (Narine)

Rust, Monani and Cubitt, *Econcinema Theory and Practice*, Routledge, 2013
(Rust/Monani/Cubitt)

Willoquet-Maricondi, *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*, University of Virginia Press, 2010 (Willoquet-Maricondi)

Introduction (Jan 13): Environmentalism, Sustainability and Proto-Environmental Documentary

Screening:

The River (Pare Lorentz, 1938, 31 mins.);

The Flooding River: A Study in Riverine Ecology (L.P. Brower, 1972, 34 mins.);

Songhua (JP Sniadecki, 2007, 28 mins.);

Minamata: The Victims and Their World (Tsuchimoto Noriaki, 1971, excerpts);

Reading:

Buell, Heise and Thornber, "Literature and Environment" in *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, Vol. 36: 417-440 (November 2011);

Charles Musser, "Trauma, Truth and the Environmental Documentary" (Narine)

Week 1 (Jan 20 – NO CLASS 1/18 FOR MLK DAY): Environmental Movements, Eco-Criticism, and the Anti-Pastoral

Screening:

Charisma (Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 1999, 104 mins.);

Clips from *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922, 79 mins), *Earth* (Alexander Dovzhenko, 1930, 84 mins.), *Red Desert* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1964, 120 mins.)

Reading:

Tim Palmer, "The Rules of the World: Japanese Eco-Cinema and Kiyoshi Kurosawa" (Willoquet-Maricondi);

Jhan Hochman, "Introduction" in *Green Cultural Studies*, University of Idaho Press, 1998

Ingram, "The Aesthetics and Ethics of Eco-Film Criticism" (Rust/Monani/Cubitt)

Week 2 (Jan 25/27): The Anthropocene and Political Rhetoric

Screening:

An Inconvenient Truth (Davis Guggenheim, 2006, 96 mins.)

Reading:

Crespo and Käätä, "Climate Change Films: Fear and Agency Appeals"
(Käätä/Gustafsson)

Cubitt, "Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere: Data Visualization and Ecocriticism"
(Rust/Monani/Cubitt)

Richard Levins, "Whose Scientific Method? Scientific Methods for a Complex World" in

Week 3 (Feb 1/3): Eco-Trauma Cinema

Screening:

Interstellar (Christopher Nolan, 2014, 169 mins.);
Clips from *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004, 124 mins.);
Clips from *Snowpiercer* (Bong Joon-ho, 2013, 126 mins.)

Reading:

Narine, "Introduction: Eco-Trauma Cinema" (Narine)
Ivakhiv, Excerpts from "Terror and Trauma: The Geopolitics of the Real" (Ivakhiv)
Rust, "Hollywood and Climate Change" (Rust/Monani/Cubitt)

Week 4 (Feb 8/10): Scalar Problems, Deep Time, Slow Violence, Slow Motion

Screening:

Chasing Ice (Jeff Orlowski, 2012, 75 mins.);
Clips from *Peak* (Hannes Lang, 2011, 86 mins.)

Reading:

Nixon, Excerpts from *Slow Violence*;
Deepesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses" in *Critical Inquiry* vol. 35
no. 2 (Winter 2009);
Malcolm Turvey, Excerpts from *Doubting Vision: Film and the Revelationist Tradition*,
Oxford University Press, 2008

Week 5 (Feb 15/17): Media Ecology: From Media Archaeology to Media Geology

Screening:

Lessons of Darkness (Werner Herzog, 1992, 50 mins.)
Excerpts from *Fata Morgana* (Werner Herzog, 1971, 79 mins.); *Koyaanisqatsi* (Godfrey
Reggio, 1982, 87 mins.)

Reading:

Jussi Parikka, Excerpts from *A Geology of Media*
Jamie Kruse and Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Design Specs in the Anthropocene: Imagining the
Force of 30,000 Years of Geologic Change" (Davis/Turpin)

Week 6 (Feb 22/24): Toxic Media—Paranoid Reading

Screening:

Safe (Todd Haynes, 1995, 119 mins.)

Reading:

Sean Cubitt, "Toxic Media" (Narine)
Jussi Parikka, *The Anthropocene* (excerpts), University of Minnesota Press, 2015

Week 7 (Feb 29/Mar 2): The Affect of Climate Change

Screening:

Still Life (Jia Zhangke, 2006, 112 mins.)

Reading:

Corrado Neri, “China Has a Natural Environment Too!: Consumerist and Ideological Ecoimaginaries in the Cinema of Feng Xiaogang” (Kääpä/Gustafsson);

Ivakhiv, “Green Identities: Images of Choice, Hope, Struggle and Community” (Ivakhiv);

John H. Richardson, “When the End of Human Civilization Is Your Day Job”: <http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a36228/ballad-of-the-sad-climatologists-0815/>

*****Spring Break, No Class*****

Week 8 (Mar 14/16): The Planetary: Melancholic Love

Screening:

Melancholia (Lars von Trier, 2011, 136 mins);

Clips from *Land of Hope* (Sion Sono, 2012, 134 mins.)

Reading:

Masao Miyoshi, “A Turn to the Planet: Literature, Diversity and Totality” in *Comparative Literature* (Fall 2001)

Christophe Thouny, “*Land of Hope*: Planetary Cartographies of Fukushima” in *Mechademia* vol. 10

Week 9 (Mar 21/23): Indifferent Nature—The Post-Human

Screening:

Grizzly Man (Werner Herzog, 2005, 104 mins.);

Clips from *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, 2013, 87 mins.)

Reading:

Elizabeth Henry, “In Screaming Silence: Constructions of Nature in Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man*” (Willoquet-Maricondi)

Ladino, “Working with Animals: Regarding Companion Species in Documentary Film” (Rust/Monani/Cubitt)

Week 10 (Mar 28/30): Avant-Gardens and Eco-Aesthetics

Screening:

From *The Weather Diaries* (George Kuchar, 1999 to present)

Garden of Earthly Delights (Stan Brakhage, 1981, 2.5 mins)

Selected *Bouquets* (Rose Lowder, 2001-2009)
Crossroads (Bruce Conner, 1976, 36 mins.)
The Old Place (Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, 2000, 47 mins.)

Reading:

Excerpts from Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine*, University of California Press, 2001

MacDonald, "The Ecocinema Experience" (Rust/Monani/Cubitt)

Irmgard Emmelhainz, "Images Do Not Show: The Desire to See in the Anthropocene"
(Davis/Turpin)

Week 11 (Apr 4/6): Reparative Reading, Against Paranoia

Screening:

The Tree of Life (Terrence Malick, 2011, 139 mins.);

Clips from *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* (Kim Ki-duk, 2003, 103 mins.)

Reading:

Steven Rybin, "On *The Tree of Life*" in *Terrence Malick and the Thought of Film*, Lexington Books, 2012

Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Duke University Press, 2003

Charles Fourier, Excerpts from *Theory of the Four Movements*, Cambridge University Press, 1996

Week 12 (Apr 11/13): Waste Management

Screening:

WALL-E (Andrew Stanton, 2008, 98 mins.)

Reading:

Alexa Weik von Mosser, "'Love in the Times of Ecocide: Environmental Trauma and Comic Relief in Andrew Stanton's *WALL-E*'"

Arjun Appadurai, "The Production of Locality" in *Modernity at Large*, University of Minnesota Press, 1996

Week 13 (Apr 18/20): Students' Choice

Screening:

Students' Choice

Reading:

Students' Choice

Project presentations

Conclusion (Apr 25)

Project presentations

Final Projects Due Date TBA