

ECOPOLITICS & THE CINEMA



Dates: Mondays 4:05-7:05 pm
Location: James Jeffords Hall Rm. 127

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CATALOG DESCRIPTION

This seminar course will examine the intersections between films/filmmaking and ecological thought and politics. It will apply the tools of ecocritical cultural studies to cinematic practice and to representations of the relationship between humans and the natural world. Themes to be explored include the ecopolitics of Hollywood and its alternatives, including independent and experimental cinema; representations of gender, race, and indigeneity in environmental films; landscape and national identity; film and sense of place; cinematic animals; energy and resource use; eco-documentaries and protest movements; and ecological utopias and dystopias.

COURSE OVERVIEW

This will be a course in the rhetorics of cinematic communication concerning the changing relations between people and the natural world.

Let's break that down into bite-sized bits.

- 1) **Rhetorics:** "Rhetoric" refers to the art of speaking or addressing an audience. What are the best or most effective styles of cinematic speech about environmental or ecopolitical topics? What are the different modes or styles of speaking—speaking to, speaking for, speaking with, or speaking against—available to filmmakers concerned with environmental issues? Some of those styles include the explanatory, investigative, or observational; the melodramatic or heroic; the comical or ironic; and the lyrical, poetic, ruminative, sublime, elegiac, and apocalyptic.
- 2) **Cinematic communication:** This refers to communication through moving images, which includes film, video, animation, and digital forms of audio-visual media. But mostly it means *movies*.
- 3) **Concerning the changing relations between people and the natural world:** Let's tease this apart...
 - **People:** The options here are many: we might mean *all* people, i.e., humanity as a whole; or a particular group, such as Americans, environmentalists, residents of a given community, and so on; or some people as opposed to others, where the differences are crucial—e.g., poor versus wealthy, whites versus non-whites, colonizers versus colonized, men versus women, victims of environmental injustice versus those who benefit from such injustice, and so on. Or we might wish to include more than just humans—perhaps certain animals or even all sentient beings, everyone with a desire to live, everyone who can suffer. Or maybe also those who haven't been born yet, people of the world to come.

- **Natural world:** Here we might mean the green and growing things we see every day (excluding us), or living systems conceived ecologically (ecosystems, biotic communities), or specific places and landscapes, or the whole biosphere of the Earth (including us), or the entire universe.
- **Changing relations:** This is the crux. How are these relations changing, and why? Are they declining? Collapsing? Reviving? Every film about such changing relations tells a *narrative* about them, a story in which a “we”—the heroes, the active agents, the individual or group at the center of the storyline—are poised in a place of change from a situation A to a situation B. (Without that change, the film wouldn’t maintain our interest.) How are they involved in that change: are they passively responding to it, actively shaping it, resisting or fighting another group that’s *differently* involved in it, or what?

Whenever films depict such changing relations involving human groups and environments (including ecological environments), we are dealing with **ecopolitics**. This term refers to the ways in which these differentiated relations—relations between different groups, different perspectives, different responses to what’s happening—are mapped out, highlighted (with some things emphasized and other things left out), and made to *mean* things about the *real* world of ecological politics—politics involving changing relationships to air, water, land, resources, environmental hazards, and possible futures for life on this earth (or beyond it).

We will discuss these things—and the *power* of the moving image—in terms of three dimensions, which we be our **modes of analysis**:

- 1) **Representation**, or: what does a moving image *stand for*, *to whom*, and *at whose expense*? What’s this film *about*? What’s being *represented* here—what issue, place, people—and how? Who is depicted as an *agent*, a protagonist with power to change things, and who is shown as a merely passive member of a (typically stereotyped) bystander group? No film can present everything there is to know and feel about a topic; it only does this very selectively. So answering this question requires analyzing the choices made in a film’s making—from the selection of locations, actors, and texts to lighting, camera movement, editing, and much else, as these concern the topics, places, people, and situations being depicted and referred to.
- 2) **Experience**, or: what does a moving image *do*, *with* and *for* whom, and *to what end*? Films and moving images affect us: they make us laugh, cry, *want* things, *hope* for things, *fear* things. We may watch the same film, but my experience of it will be different from yours, and it is that *experience* that stays with us, lingers in our emotional lives, inflects or infects our conversations and interactions with others, and seeps into our dreams and nightmares. Images affect us more directly than textual media because they *bypass* our cognitive circuits and affect us “in the gut.” Images *move* us, and *moving images* move us all the more.
- 3) **Materiality**, or: what *makes* this image, *with* and *from* what, and *at what cost*? Filmmaking costs money—usually lots of it—but more importantly, in an ecological analysis, it uses resources—mountains of metals, chemicals, plastics, and other *stuff*. And it produces stuff—things that end up on trash heaps, in sewers, soils, lakes and oceans, in the atmosphere and even (as with radio waves) beyond it. Nothing goes away; it just goes somewhere else. How do films deal with the material constraints of a finite planet? Do they factor it into their production? Do they help us think and deal with it, or do they just help us forget and ignore it?

COURSE EXPECTATIONS

1. **Attendance & participation** (20%): The course will take a seminar format, and readings, screenings, and class discussions will be imperative to the success of the class. Students are expected to attend all classes, to do all required readings in preparation for their discussion in class, and to participate in class discussions in an informed and respectful manner that contributes to the collective thinking through of issues raised. If you cannot make it to a class, please notify me in advance. The attendance/participation grade will include an in-class **curatorial presentation** as part of the student-selected Short Films Fest to take place in the final class (details to be provided).
2. **Reading & response journals** (20%): Film and reading responses are to be handed in during most weeks. These should normally be 1.5 to 2 pages in length (typed, 2bl- or 1.5- spaced). Specific questions or prompts will be announced in class; if none is provided, you are free to write about any aspect of the films or readings

that interests you most. Journals should demonstrate an up-to-date awareness of readings and class discussions. This does not mean you must refer specifically to all readings; rather, it means that if your journals show a *lack* of awareness of class or required reading material, this will count against you.

3. **Quizzes & mid-term exam** (25%):
 - **Two short in-class quizzes** (5% + 10%): These will mostly consist of multiple choice and fill-in-the-blanks questions; they will cover class materials and required readings.
 - **Mid-term take-home exam** (10%): This will include short and longer questions, with questions being provided one week in advance of the due date.
4. **Analytical research paper** (35%): You will be expected to complete a paper critically analyzing a film or set of films of your choice utilizing analytical methods from the course. This will include writing a proposal (5%), developing it into an analysis (25%), and presenting that analysis in class and/or online (5%). The paper will require conducting research into your topic, including a review of literature that has been written on it in both scholarly and popular sources (more information will be provided on this). In effect, you will be required to become an “expert” on your topic, so choose your topic carefully and keep it to a manageable size! The initial paper **proposal** will be due in class on **October 12**. A **preliminary draft** will be due **November 9**, and the final draft on Friday, **December 11**. Brief (no more than 5-minute) presentations of work-in-progress will take place in class through November, with online materials shared by November 30. The length of the final paper should be roughly 1700-2000 words, or about 7-8 dbl-spaced pages, typed, in Times New Roman 12-point or a comparably sized font. Further details will be provided.

READINGS

The following two textbooks will be available at the UVM Bookstore and on reserve at Bailey Howe Library:

1. **Green Documentary: Environmental Documentary in the 21st Century**, by Helen Hughes (Intellect, 2014).
2. **Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature**, by Adrian Ivakhiv (Wilfrid Laurier U. Press, 2013).

We will read about $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{2}{3}$ of the first book and about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the second. Other required readings will be made available electronically or in hard copy by the instructor at least one week in advance of its due date.

COURSE THEMES

The course will be loosely divided into the following four thematic areas.

1. Land (September 14, 21)

What are some of the ways that relations between people and land have been depicted in cinema? How can film depict *positive* and ecological sustainable relations between people and land? How can film *build* such relations? Some variations:

- **Land as us**, in films about how people and land are thoroughly interdependent, e.g., *Earth, Daughters of the Dust, Sleep Furiously, Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East*
- **Land as for us or becoming ours**, in films about the settling of a land marked “wilderness,” a land for the taking, as in classic Hollywood Westerns (with *The Searchers* as an example of the best of the genre)
- **Land as resource to be managed**, e.g., the New Deal era government eco-documentaries of Pare Lorentz (*The Plow That Broke the Plains, The River*)
- **Land as becoming not-ours or turning against us**, as in films of environmental alienation and disruption (e.g., *Still Life, Up the Yangtze, Trouble the Water, Chasing Ice*) or eco-horror films like *The Host* and *Godzilla*
- **Land as contested** between rival groups and different visions of how to live, e.g., *Easy Rider, Whale Rider, Keita: Heritage of the Griot, Avatar, , O No Coronado!*
- **Land as animated or haunted** by the past or by elemental forces, e.g., *Stalker, Deliverance, The Last Wave, Uncle Boonmee*, and the films of Hayao Miyazaki (*Princess Mononoke, My Neighbor Totoro, Spirited Away*)
- **Land as palimpsest**, as in the essay films of Patrick Keiller (*Robinson in Space*) or Chris Marker (*Sunless*)

2. Life (September 28, October 5, 12)

What are the ways that cinema reveals the *liveliness* of the world: its being alive and autonomous from us, its being beautiful, scary, funny, valuable in its own right, or mysterious and uncontrollable? What are the different kinds of relations depicted between people and animal or plant life? How are different *groups* of people portrayed in relation to animals and the living world (e.g., is any group depicted as closer to nature, and is this positively, negatively, or ambivalently valenced)? How are different modes of relationship *built* through the filmmaking process? Some variations:

- **Life as order, beauty, or harmony**, as in *Anima Mundi*, *Ashes and Snow*, *Baraka*, *Winged Migration*
- **Life as conflict, strife, or chaos** (“red in tooth and claw”), as expressed in *Grizzly Man* (to some extent), *Even Dwarfs Started Small*, *Lessons of Darkness*, *Wolfen*, *Antichrist*, and the eco-horror genre
- **Animals as *them***—different from us and either beautiful, funny, bizarre, or sublime, as in *Mondo Cane*, *Cane Toads*, *Microcosmos*, *Ashes and Snow*
- **Animal as *ours* to conquer or to manage**, e.g., in films about the settling of the “wilderness” or the eradication of unwanted species
- **Animals as *like us*, so they need protection**, as in eco-defense or animal rights films like *The Cove* and *Earthlings*
- **Animals as *us***, in films about human “descent” into animality or human mutuality with animals, as in *Sweetgrass*, *Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*, *Zoo*, *Leviathan*, or the “animist” films of Miyazaki or Weerasethakul

3. Resource (October 19, 26, November 2, 9)

What are the ways in which cinema reveals or conceals our dependence on material and energetic resources? And cinema’s own dependence on those resources? How are different groups of people portrayed in relation to contemporary or future conflicts over resources? Here, the variations that will interest us concern scarce resources such as oil and other fossil fuels, water, and renewable energy, with themes of

- **The tragedy of resource domination**, where corporations, governments, or ruling elites exploit resources to the detriment of all (e.g., *Darwin’s Nightmare*, *Blackfish*, *The Forgotten Space*)
- **The struggle over resources**, as in activist and investigative documentaries (e.g., *GasLand*, *Petropolis*, *Big Men*, *Crude*, *Offshore*, *Who Killed the Electric Car?*, *Fort McMurray*), historical epics (e.g., *There Will Be Blood*), or post-apocalyptic sci-fi films (e.g., *Waterworld*, the *Mad Max* series, *Elixir*)
- **The beautiful, precious, creative, or tragic resource** (e.g., *Watermark*, *Picture of Light*, *The Ister*, *The Gleaners and I*)

4. Future (August 31, November 9, 16, 30)

How does cinema depict the future of human relations with the natural world? What stories does it tell about the possible futures, and how we might get to them or avoid them? Some options:

- **The future as totalitarian nightmare**, as in *Soylent Green*, *12 Monkeys*, *Children of Men*, *Snowpiercer*, *Elysium*, *Spectres of the Spectrum*
- **The future as decline to chaos and struggle for survival**, as in *The Day After Tomorrow*, *The Road*, and the *Mad Max* series;
- **The future as conflict between utopia and dystopia**, e.g., *Avatar*, *Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000*;
- **The future as comedy**, e.g., *WALL-E*, *Ecotopia*
- **The future as mystery**, e.g., *Into Eternity*

TENTATIVE SCREENING SCHEDULE (*Asterisks indicate a likely full-length screening)

Aug 31 INTRODUCTION: GLIMPSES INTO POSSIBLE FUTURES

Viewing: *Into Eternity*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Soylent Green*, *Silent Running*, *Baraka*, assorted disaster flick clips

Sept 7 No Class (Labor Day Holiday)

Reading: Hughes, *Green Documentary*, ch. 1, pp. 3-6, 8-20; 117-134; Ivakhiv, EMI, pp. 263-266; Murray & Heumann, "Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* and its skeptics"

Sept 14 LAND & US (1)

Viewing: Earth, Daughters of the Dust, Sweetgrass, The Searchers, The Plow that Broke the Plains, The River, Red Desert, Eclipse, My Neighbor Totoro

Reading: EMI, pp. 69-77, 85-108, 116-120, 126-7 (on Baraka), 130-132 (on Brakhage) (note: these readings are related to this week's screenings, but they are only **required** for next week)

Sept 21 LAND & US (2)

Viewing: Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East*

Reading: Chang, "The Art of Self-Emptying and Ecological Integration" (and previous week's readings)

Sept 28 LIFE & US (1): NATURE & WILDLIFE DOCUMENTARIES

Viewing: The Vanishing Prairie, Bambi, Microcosmos, Winged Migration (and The Making of...), Ocean Blue (Planet Earth), Cane Toads: The Conquest*

Reading: Cubitt, "Blue Planet"; Bouse, "Simulation & Its Discontents" (pp. 9-16); EMI, pp. 199-219; Green Doc 85-93

Oct 5 LIFE & US (2): ANIMALS 'R US

Viewing: March of the Penguins, Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill, Grizzly Man*

Reading: EMI, pp. 219-226, 228-240, 244-252

Oct 12 LIFE & US (3): MEAT IS US?

Viewing: Our Daily Bread, Earthlings, Leviathan, The Cove*

Reading: Walker, "Eavesdropping in *The Cove*"; Kapoor, "Troubled waters"

Oct 19 GLOBAL RESOURCE FUTURES (1)

Viewing: Blackfish, Darwin's Nightmare*

Reading: Macdougall; Barlet; Maloney et al; Ivakhiv pp. 278-281

Oct 26 GLOBAL RESOURCE FUTURES (2)

Viewing: Manufactured Landscapes, Robinson in Space, The Forgotten Space, Waste Land, Watermark

Reading: Green Doc 43-52

Nov 2 GLOBAL RESOURCE FUTURES (3)

Viewing: Up the Yangtze, Still Life

Reading: TBA

Nov 9 ENERGY FUTURES

Viewing: Night Moves, Fort McMurray, Beasts of the Southern Wild*

Reading: Patricia Yaeger, "*Beasts of the Southern Wild* and Dirty Ecology"; bell hooks, "No Love in the Wild"; Foundas, "Louisiana Story"

Nov 16 DYSTOPIAS

Viewing: Blade Runner (R. Scott, USA, 1982), Children of Men, 12 Monkeys, Mad Max, Snowpiercer*

Reading: TBA

Nov 23 Thanksgiving Day Holiday – No Class

Nov 30 COSMIC VISIONS

Viewing: 2001, A Space Odyssey, Solaris, Star Trek, Contact, WALL-E, Melancholia, The Tree of Life

Reading: Ivakhiv, "The Age of the World Motion Picture"; Weik von Mossner, "Love in the Times of Ecocide"

Dec 7 STUDENT-CURATED SHORT FILM FESTIVAL

Viewing & reading: TBA

LIST OF FILMS CITED (possible screenings, listed alphabetically)

- 12 Monkeys (T. Gilliam, USA, 1995)
2001, A Space Odyssey (S. Kubrick, USA, 1968)
An Inconvenient Truth (D. Guggenheim, USA, 2006)
Anima Mundi (G. Reggio, USA, 1992)
Antichrist (L. Von Trier, Denmark, 2009)
Ashes and Snow (G. Colbert, USA, 2005)
Avatar (J. Cameron, USA, 2009)
Bambi (Disney Studios, USA, 1942)
Baraka (R. Fricke, USA, 1992)
Beasts of the Southern Wild (Zeitlin, USA, 2012)
Big Men (R. Boynton, USA, 2012)
Blackfish (G. Cowperthwaite, USA, 2013)
Cane Toads: The Conquest (M. Lewis, Australia, 2010)
Chasing Ice (Orlowski, USA, 2012)
Children of Men (A. Cuaron, USA, 2007)
Contact (R. Zemeckis, USA, 1987)
Darwin's Nightmare (H. Sauper, France/Austria/Belgium, 2004)
Daughters of the Dust (J. Dash, USA, 1991)
Detropia (Ewing & Grady, USA, 2012)
Dimensions of Dialogue (J. Svankmajer, Czechoslovakia, 1982)
Earth (O. Dovzhenko, USSR, 1929)
Earthlings (S. Monson, 2005, USA)
Easy Rider (D. Hopper, USA, 1969)
Eclipse (L'Eclisse) (M. Antonioni, Italy, 1962)
Ecotopia (Y. Aksu, Turkey, 2012)
Elixir (M. Lipke, USA, 2015)
Even Dwarfs Started Small (W. Herzog, W. Germany, 1970)
Fort McMONEY (D. Dufresne, Canada, 2014)
GasLand (J. Fox, USA, 2010)
Grizzly Man (W. Herzog, USA, 2005)
Into Eternity (M. Madsen, Denmark, 2010)
Jonah Who Will be 25 in the Year 2000 (A. Tanner, Switzerland, 1975)
Keita, the Heritage of the Griot (D. Kouyate, Burkina Faso, 1995)
Land Without Bread/Las Hurdes (L. Bunuel, Spain, 1933)
Lessons of Darkness (W. Herzog, Germany/France/UK, 1992)
Leviathan (Castaing-Taylor & Paravel, 2012, USA)
Mad Max: Fury Road (G. Miller, USA, 2015)
Manufactured Landscapes (J. Baichwal, Canada, 2006)
Melancholia (L. Von Trier, Denmark, 2011)
Microcosmos (Nuridsany & Perennou, France, 1996)
Musicwood (Grainger & Trump, USA, 2012)
My Neighbor Totoro (H. Miyazaki, Japan, 1993)
Night Moves (K. Reichardt, USA, 2013)
O No Coronado! (C. Baldwin, USA, 1992)
Our Daily Bread (N. Geyrhalter, Austria, 2005)
Petropolis (P. Mettler, Canada, 2009)
Planet Earth (BBC, USA-UK-Japan-Canada, 2006)
Princess Mononoke (H. Miyazaki, Japan, 1997)
Red Desert (Il Deserto Rosso) (M. Antonioni, Italy, 1964)
Robinson in Space (P. Keiller, UK, 1997)
Short films by Stan Brakhage (1952-2003)
Sleep Furiously (G. Koppel, UK, 2007)
Snowpiercer (B. Joon-Ho, Korea, 2013)
Solaris (A. Tarkovsky, USSR, 1973)
Soylent Green (R. Fleischer, USA, 1973)
Spectres of the Spectrum (C. Baldwin, USA, 2000, 94m)
Spirited Away (H. Miyazaki, Japan, 2001)
Spring Summer Fall Winter... & Spring (K. Ki-Duk, Korea, 2003)
Stalker (A. Tarkovsky, USSR, 1979)
Still Life (J. Zhang-Ke, China, 2006)
Sweetgrass (I. Barbash & L. Castaing-Taylor, USA, 2009)
The Ballad of Narayama (S. Imamura, Japan, 1983)
The Cabinet of Jan Svankmajer (The Brothers Quay, UK, 1984)
The Cove (L. Psihoyos, USA, 2009)
The Day After Tomorrow (R. Emmerich, USA, 2004)
The Forgotten Space (A. Sekula and N. Burch, Netherlands, 2011)
The Gleaners and I (A. Varda, France, 2001)
The Last Wave (P. Weir, Australia, 1977)
The Plow that Broke the Plains (P. Lorentz, USA, 1936)
The Puppet's Nightmare (Emile Cohl, France, 1908)
The River (Pare Lorentz, USA, 1938)
The Road (J. Hillcoat, USA, 2009)
The Searchers (J. Ford, USA, 1956)
The Tree of Life (T. Malick, USA, 2011)
The Vanishing Prairie (Walt Disney's True Life Adventures Series, Disney Studios, USA, 1955)
The World (J. Zhang-Ke, China, 2004)
There Will Be Blood (P. T. Anderson, USA, 2007)
Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives (A. Weerasethakul, Thailand, 2010)
Up the Yangtze (Y. Chang, Canada, 2007)
WALL-E (A. Stanton, USA, 2008)
Waste Land (L. Walker, USA, 2010)
Watermark (J. Baichwal & E. Burtynsky, USA, 2014)
Whale Rider (N. Caro, New Zealand, 2002)
Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East (B. Yong-Kyun, Korea, 1989)
Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill (J. Irving, USA, 2005)
Winged Migration (J. Perrin, et al., France, 2001)
Wolfen (M. Wadleigh, USA, 1981)