Ecopolitics & the Cinema

**INSTRUCTOR**
Dr. Adrian Ivakhiv

**OFFICE**
Bittersweet House, 153 South Prospect Street

**CONSULTATION TIMES**
Mon. 1:30-3:00 pm, Wed. 10:30-12:30 pm (for appointment please call Sue Bean x. 64055).

**CONTACT INFO**
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Please always specify ‘ENVS295’ in e-mail Subject line

**SECRETARY**
Sue Bean, Environmental Program, tel: 656-4055

**CLASS MEETINGS**
Wednesdays 2:30-5:30 pm

**GENERAL DESCRIPTION:** This seminar course will apply the tools of ecocriticism and cultural and media studies to cinematic representations of the relationship between humans and the natural world. Themes to be explored include the politics of Hollywood film and its alternatives, the colonial and imperial gaze, landscape and national identity, film and sense of place, ecological utopias and dystopias, and feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives on film and ecology.

**COURSE THEMES**
‘Ecocritical’ perspectives have emerged within literary and cultural studies as ways of understanding the interaction between culture, especially literature, and environmental discourse and practice. While early ecocriticism focused on genres of writing most closely connected to conservation and environmental movements (e.g. ‘nature writing’ and environmental rhetoric), ecocriticism has grown much broader in diversity and in scope, and now includes an interest in all forms of literature as well as film and the visual and performing arts.
This course will define ‘ecocriticism’ and ‘ecopolitics’ broadly and will situate these among other streams of cultural theory as well as within traditions of environmental thought and philosophy. We will refer to several traditions of environmental thought, including liberal or reformist environmentalism, deep ecology (or biocentrism), social ecology, ecofeminism, and postmodern environmentalism. The primary focus of the course, however, will be on applying a general socio-ecological sensibility, rooted in traditions of both social and environmental ethics, to the viewing and interpretation of cinema. We will be less interested in the politics portrayed in cinema than in the politics of cinema – that is, not only what film and visual media show us but how they show us these things and how this affects our ‘ways of seeing’ and understanding of ourselves and our relationship to the nonhuman world.

The principle question to be explored in our screenings and discussions is this: **How do films work on audiences?** Specifically, **how do they generate meanings and affects** (feelings, sentiments, emotional responses, desires, motivations, sensibilities), especially those related to the understanding of the ‘human’ and the ‘natural’? We will explore and discuss a wide range of film forms and genres – including Hollywood, Disney, and large-scale nature documentaries (such as BBC’s *Planet Earth* series) as well as foreign, independent, ethnographic, experimental, and art films – and will contextualize these within the evolving history of socio-political relations and movements including Romanticism and the American conservation movement, anthropological and colonial encounters with the non-West, the 1960s New Left and counterculture, feminism, Third World liberation movements, neoliberalism, and globalization. Screenings will be accompanied both by analyses of the films in question and by readings across a range of critical theories and historical contexts.

Discussion will be organized around such concepts as these:

- **Gaze, mastery, and otherness:** What is involved in acts of looking and seeing, for both seer and seen? How have our ways of seeing been shaped by histories of colonialism, Eurocentrism, masculinism/ patriarchy, anthropocentric modernism, consumerism? How do cultures and technologies of seeing ‘frame’ and ‘objectify’ what is seen? What is the colonial gaze, the imperial gaze, the scientific (or objectifying) gaze, the male gaze (at women), the magisterial gaze (at landscape)? How have the dominant visual traditions (e.g., of Hollywood) been questioned and re-envisioned by independent, radical and experimental filmmakers? Are there ways of seeing that are more open, dialogical, democratic, or ‘biophilic’ than others?

- **The world & the frame: the spectacle of nature:** What happens to the world, i.e. ‘pre-cinematic’ reality, and to our experience of it when that world is photographed, filmed, edited, reproduced, and consumed as a flow of images by viewers? How do photographic and visual technologies affect space, time, distance, location, sense of place, and ideas of nature and humanity/animality? Do some film techniques (e.g., documentary) provide more reliable access to reality than others? What is a ‘truthful’ cinematic representation? What are the dominant traditions of representing nature (in Western landscape art and photography)? How have idealized, romantic, and sublime representations of nature shaped the contemporary environmental imagination (e.g., North American conservation and environmental movements)? What are the socio-political implications of portraying nature and wilderness as a primal, restorative, other-than-human force (i.e. wilderness)?

- **Encounters & identities:** How are encounters across cultures portrayed in visual media, and how have media come to shape such encounters? How are encounters between humans and the nonhuman – animals, nature, landscapes, ecosystems – portrayed in and shaped by visual media? What are the ethics of cultural representation across boundaries – of skin, of culture, of identity, of species? How has film mapped cultural difference against ideas of nature and ‘natural’ difference? For instance, what are the implications of portraying native peoples as ‘noble savages,’ living ‘in harmony with nature,’ but also threatened by modernity or destined to disappear? What are the possibilities of different approaches to film – such as heroic narrative, melodrama, romantic and sublime portrayals of nature, and self-reflexive and experimental narratives (e.g., ‘mockumentary,’ nonlinear narrative, ‘reverse ethnography’) – for generating socio-ecological awareness?

The premise of the course will be that there are ethical and environmental/ecological implications to each of these sets of questions; that is, there are ways of seeing and encountering the world through visual media that are more consonant with socio-ecological ethics, and we will attempt to explore what these might be.
READING

**Required Texts**
3. Other readings will be made available electronically or on Bailey-Howe course reserve.

**Suggestions for Background Reading**

**Film & Visual Studies:**

**Environmental Thought & Philosophy:**

**Ecocriticism & Green Cultural Studies:**

**Environment & Film/Visual Studies:**
COURSE EXPECTATIONS

Students are required to attend classes, participate in class discussions, prepare weekly written responses to readings and screenings, and write one major term paper. Detailed requirements for these tasks will be provided. Grades will be apportioned as follows:

- Attendance & participation 15%
- Weekly reading & response journal 50%
- Term paper 35%

1. **Attendance & participation (15%)**
   The course will take a seminar format, and readings, screenings, and class discussions will be crucial 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 which contributes to the collective ‘thinking through’ of the issues raised. If a student cannot make it to a class, s/he should notify the instructor ahead of time; those who miss more than two classes without a valid medical or emergency reason will fail the course.

2. **Reading & response journals (50%)**
   Weekly film and reading responses are to be handed in regularly throughout the semester.
   - **Film responses** will normally involve answering the following questions:
     1. How does this film ‘work’ on me? What are the meanings and affects (emotional responses, sentiments, sensibilities) that it generates in me?
     2. What cinematic methods & mechanisms does the film use to do this ‘work’?
   Forms will be provided in class for students to make notes on different elements of the viewing experience during or immediately after screenings. Students are expected to hand in completed film responses a week after screenings. These should be typed and roughly a page in length (1-1/2 spaced). (Handwritten responses may be allowed, but students should first present a sample of their handwriting to the instructor for approval.) When more than one film is screened in class, students can choose which films to respond to.
   - **Reading responses** will be based on weekly readings; questions will be provided on a weekly basis. These should be typed, 1-1/2 spaced, 1 to 2 pages in length per week, and must be handed in on time.

3. **Term paper (35%)**
   Each student will be expected to complete a paper critically analyzing a film or set of films utilizing analytical methods from the course. While other analytical methods (i.e., not covered in the course) may be incorporated into the analysis, students should refer to at least some of the ‘ecocritical’ analytical categories (e.g., examining the representation of nature or human relations to nature, etc.) discussed in the ‘Cultural Circuit’ handout, given out in class. This should take place in two stages:
   i. **One-page proposal** (due March 19, worth 5%): This should outline the object of your analysis, your specific method(s) of analysis, and a rationale for choosing this method in relation to your object (with reference to other literature, if relevant).
   ii. **Paper** (due April 23, worth 30%): This should consist of the following:
      (a) A brief introduction stating the topic and thesis (no more than one paragraph).
      (b) Description of the film, set of films, or object of analysis, providing any essential background to understanding the object (no more than 2-3 paragraphs).
      (c) In-depth analysis of the object. (This should be the longest section of the paper.)
      (d) Brief conclusion summarizing your evaluation of your object of analysis (normally one paragraph).
      (e) Full bibliography of all sources, in APA, MLA, Chicago style or another academically recognized style.
   **Suggested length:** roughly 1500-1800 words, or about four to five 1.5-spaced (or 6 double-spaced) pages in length, typed, in Times New Roman 12-point or comparably sized font.
POSSIBLE SCREENINGS & RELATED READINGS

The following is a ‘working list’ of possible screening and readings (including background and supplementary reading materials). Actual screenings and dates will depend on availability, student interest, and other factors. Screenings and required readings will be announced in class.

Introduction & Overview of Course Themes


Screenings: may include excerpts from Bambi, The Lion King, Jurassic Park, Earth (Zemlya), Man with a Movie Camera, Solaris, and films by Stan Brakhage

Readings:

Global Warning: The Cinema of Eco-Disaster

Themes: Eco-nostalgia & eco-apocalypse: imagining a bleak future & an idealized past. Visions of disaster from the 1970s to the present. Do warnings of eco-disaster mobilize audiences to action?

Screenings: excerpts from The Day After Tomorrow, Soylent Green, Silent Running, An Inconvenient Truth, Blade Runner

Readings:

Nature as Other: Race, Gender, & the Imperial Gaze


Screening: King Kong (1933, USA, 112 m)

Readings:
- James Snead, “Spectatorship and capture in King Kong: The guilty look”, Critical Quarterly 33.1
Disney: Shaping a Sentimental Nature
Screenings: Bambi (1943, USA, 70m) and/or The Lion King (1994, USA, 89m)
Readings:
  David Ingram, ‘Discourses of nature and environmentalism,’ ch. 1, Green Screen
  Matthew Roth, “Man is in the forest: Humans and nature in Bambi and Lion King,” Invisible Culture 9 (2005), http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue_9/.
  Brode, Douglas, From Walt to Woodstock: How Disney Created the Counterculture (Univ. of Texas Press, 2004).

Fear of Nature: Psychoanalysis, Gender, Ecocriticism
Themes: Chaotic, uncontrollable nature. Femininity/masculinity and nature. Hitchcock’s (conservative?) Romanticism. Wilderness as sanructiy and as threat.
Screening: The Birds (Dir. A. Hitchcock, USA, 1963, 120m) or Deliverance (dir. J. Boorman, USA, 1972, 105m)
Readings:
  Ingram, ch. 2, ‘The cinematography of wilderness landscapes,’ and ch. 3, ‘Gender and encounters with wilderness,’ Green Screen

Nature as Chaos: Colonialism, the ‘Heart of Darkness,’ & Werner Herzog’s Ironic Sublime
Screening: Aguirre, the Wrath of God (dir. W. Herzog, 1973, 94 m)
Readings:
  John Davidson, “As others put plays upon the stage: Aguirre, neocolonialism, and the New German Cinema,” New German Critique 60 (1993), 101-130.
**Culturing Nature, Naturalizing Culture: Ethnographies & Counter-Ethnographies**

**Themes:** Nature & cultural difference: Ethnographic cinema, reverse ethnography, ‘mockumentary,’ & indigenous cinema.

**Screenings** may include excerpts or selections from the following list: Nanook and the North, Nanook Revisited, Reassemblage, Baraka, Cannibal Tours, Cane Toads, Un chien délicieux, Shooting Indians, Atanarjuat

**Readings:**
- Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, ed., *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1999).
- Trinh Minh-Ha, *Framer Framed* (Routledge, 1992)

**Nature as Spectacle: Representing Ecology, from the Intimate to the Infinite**


**Screenings** may include excerpts/selections from The Plow that Broke the Plains, Winged Migration, March of the Penguins, Planet Earth, Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill, Picture of Light, experimental films by Stan Brakhage, Bill Viola, and others

**Readings:**
- Cubitt, Sean, “The Blue Planet: Virtual nature and natural virtue,” ch. 4 in *EcoMedia*.
- MacDonald, Scott. “Up close and personal: Three short ruminations on ideology in the nature film.” *Film Quarterly* 59. 3 (4-21).
- Stan Brakhage, from *Metaphors on Vision*.

**In Quest of Nature: Romancing the Wild**

**Themes:** Romanticism, pure & self-reflexive. Dialogical eco-cinema.

**Screenings:** *Picture of Light* (excerpts; dir. P. Mettler, Canada, 83m); *Grizzly Man* (dir. W. Herzog, USA, 2005, 103m)

**Readings:**
The 1960s: Counter-Cultural Nature & the American Landscape


Screening: Easy Rider (dir. D. Hopper & P. Fonda, USA, 1969, 85m)

Readings:
- Ingram, ch. 10, ‘Country and city,’ Green Screen

Capitalism, 1968, and Utopian/Eco-Socialist Nature


Screening: Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000 (dir. A. Tanner, Switzerland, 1976, 110m)

Readings:
- Bertolt Brecht, “Theatre for pleasure and theatre for instruction?”

Nature, Race, Gender: African-American Cinema as Third Cinema


Screening: Daughters of the Dust (dir. J. Dash, 1991, USA, 112m)

Readings:
Globalized Nature: War, Ecology, and the Ethics of Global Documentary
       Romantic and anti-romantic depictions of toxic & embattled landscapes.
Screening: Darwin’s Nightmare (dir. H. Sauper, Austria, 2004, 107m); excerpts from Lessons of Darkness (dir. W. Herzog, 1992)
Readings:
   Lake Victoria’s Fisheries Organization, letter to Hubert Sauper, 8 Dec 2005.
   Olivier Barlet, “The ambiguity of Darwin’s nightmare,” Africultures.com
   Kenneth Harrow, “The little story”, Africultures.com
   Adam Bingham, “Apocalypse then: Lessons of Darkness revisited”
   Richard Misrach, “Exceeding the carrying capacity of the West”

Recycled Nature: Capitalism & its Waste Products
Screenings: The Gleaners and I (dir. Agnes Varda, France, 2000, 82m); Chris Baldwin film excerpts
Readings:
   Dunja Radosavljevic, “Agnes Varda’s L’ecriture feminine”

Screening: Stalker (dir. A. Tarkovsky, USSR, 1979, 163m)
Readings:
   Slavoj Zizek, “Nature does not exist,” from Looking Awry (pp. 34-39)
   Arkady & Boris Strugatsky, Roadside Picnic, avail. at http://www.cca.org/cm/picnic.pdf

Postmodern Nature: Deconstructing the Imperial Gaze
Themes: Deconstructing the mastering gaze. Writing, knowledge, and nature. Caliban & the resistance of the colonized.
Readings:
Future Nature:
Themes: Apocalyptic futurism.
Screening: 12 Monkeys (dir. T. Gilliam, 130m) or Children of Men (dir. A. Cuaron, 2006, 109m)
Readings:
Pat Brereton, “Conspiracy thrillers and science fiction: 1950s to 1990s” and “Postmodernist science fiction films and ecology,” ch. 4 and 5 in Hollywood Utopia.

POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE SCREENINGS/READINGS

Princess Mononoke (dir. H. Miyazake, 1997, Japan, 134m)
Sean Cubitt, “Drawing animals: Zoomorphism in Princess Mononoke,” ch. 2 in EcoMedia.

Safe (dir. T. Haynes, USA, 119m)

Limbo (dir. J. Sayles, USA, 1999, 126m)

Whale Rider (dir. N. Caro, New Zealand, 2002, 101 m)
Sean Cubitt, “Ecology as destiny: The Perfect Storm and Whale Rider,” ch. 5 in EcoMedia.

Dead Man (dir. J. Jarmusch, 1995, USA, 120m)
Jurassic Park (dir. S. Spielberg, 1993, USA, 127m)

Days of Heaven (dir. T. Malick, USA, 1978, 95m)

The New World (dir. T. Malick, USA, 2006, 135m)

Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East? (dir. Bae Yong-Kyun, Korea, 1989/1993, 137m)

Milagro Beanfield War (dir. R. Redford, USA, 1988, 117m)

The Burning Season (dir. J. Frankenheimer, USA, 1994, 115m)

Yellow Earth (dir. Chen Kaige, China, 1988, 90m)
Esther CM Yau, "Yellow Earth: Western Analysis and a Non-Western Text." Film Quarterly 41.2 (1987-88), 22-33.
**SUPPLEMENTARY FILMOGRAPHY**

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<td>Cane Toads</td>
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<td>Cannibal Tours</td>
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<td>Anima Mundi (G. Reggio)</td>
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