The Culture of Nature:  
Art, Music, & Cultural Politics in the Anthropocene

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<tr>
<th>INSTRUCTOR</th>
<th>Dr. Adrian Ivakhiv</th>
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<tr>
<td>OFFICE</td>
<td>Bittersweet House, 153 South Prospect Street</td>
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<tr>
<td>CONSULTATION TIMES</td>
<td>Wed. 2-4 pm. For appointments, please call Sue Bean at 656-4055</td>
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<td>CONTACT INFO</td>
<td>Tel: (802) 656-0180; E-mail: <a href="mailto:Adrian.Ivakhiv@uvm.edu">Adrian.Ivakhiv@uvm.edu</a></td>
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<td>Please specify ‘ENVS 295’ in Subject line of e-mails</td>
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<tr>
<td>CLASS MEETINGS</td>
<td>Tuesdays 1:00-3:45 pm, Living/Learning B-101</td>
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CATALOG DESCRIPTION

This course offers an advanced introduction to current issues and debates at the intersection of environmental science and cultural studies. The field of cultural studies – which studies the ways in which popular culture, media, the creative arts, and other forms of cultural activity intersect with sociopolitical, economic, and technological developments – is explored in terms of its potentials to address and contribute to understanding environmental issues and practices. The course studies culture and cultural practices – including music, film and visual art, print and digital media, fashion, and protest cultures – as both the medium through which and the terrain within which different ideas about people and nature, and different social and ecological relations, are articulated and contested.

Through readings, discussion, and media viewing and analysis, we explore and examine how ideas about nature and environmental issues are framed and represented by various media; how these images and representations are used and contested by different cultural communities; the ways in which environmental ideas circulate between mass and digital media and popular and alternative cultures in North America and the world today; the relationship between culture and “environmental identities” at local, regional, national, and transnational scales; and possibilities for cultivating a “greener” environmental culture in our lives and in the world.

Requirements include class attendance and participation, a critical cultural analysis and presentation, a research paper, and a group project which may involve some form of media production.
RATIONAL AND THEMES

Geologists today are debating the proposal that the Earth has moved into an entirely new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. While previous epochs were defined by large-scale atmospheric, biological, geological and glacial events, this new epoch is defined primarily by human impacts upon the planet’s biophysical processes. What this implies is that the nature of nature may be changing, or at least that nature—which for humans has more often represented a guarantee of long-term stability—is unstable over time.

In recent years, also, humanists and social scientists have studied the ways that the idea of nature changes in accordance with sociopolitical and cultural trends. Concurrently, many environmental theorists and activists believe that the ecological crisis cannot be effectively addressed through strictly technical measures, because they are intertwined within a crisis of politics and/or of values and worldview. In other words, the ecological crisis is not just a scientific fact to be solved through “technological fixes”; it is more importantly a cultural fact—conceived, imagined, and discussed through cultural practices—and our responses to the crisis are enabled as well as constrained by our cultural means of imagining and interpreting both our relationship to nature and nature itself.

This course will draw on critical social and cultural theory to study some ways in which “nature” and our relationship to it are being reinterpreted in the light of the ecological crisis that marks the recognition of the Anthropocene. We will focus on culture and cultural practices—including music, film and visual art, print and digital media, fashion, and protest cultures—as both the medium through which and the terrain within which different ideas about people and nature, and different social and ecological relations, are articulated and contested.

To do this, we will draw on the field of cultural studies, which has provided an array of theoretical and analytical tools for understanding the ways cultural meanings circulate within modern society—i.e., the ways peoples’ understandings of the world are shaped by institutions, political-economic relations, changing cultural and technological forms, and everyday life practices. With its in-depth focus on popular and alternative cultures and subcultures, dominant or hegemonic cultural formations, and evolving media technologies, cultural studies has been especially concerned with understanding the workings of culture in relation to social and political struggles, and with enhancing the possibilities for social and cultural change.

We will also draw on the related fields of cultural geography, cultural anthropology and sociology, media studies, and critical cultural policy studies, bringing these to bear on how environmental issues and struggles are imbued with relations of power (between social groups as well as between humans and nonhuman organisms), are emotionally and affectively involving, are entangled within individual, collective, and geographically situated forms of identity, and are communicated and mediated through images, narratives, and mythic and iconic representations that circulate within complex and increasingly global media networks.

The course will raise questions such as:

- How is “nature” (the nonhuman, the environment, ecology, etc.) perceived, interpreted, and represented?
- What’s at stake in these perceptions and representations, and for whom?
- How and why do these perceptions/representations change over time, and how do such changes enable or constrain the possibilities for ecological politics today?

Topics to be covered in the course may include:

- concepts and methods in cultural studies, including ideology, political economy, hegemony, identity construction, framing, semiotic and ethnographic methods for analyzing texts and their cultural reception;
- visual imagery in environmental communication, including in promotion and consciousness-raising around environmental causes (such as the wilderness preservation movement of the 19th century, the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the marketing of “green” products, and so on);
- images of nature, wilderness, and animals, in visual art (including landscape painting and photography), political discourse, product marketing, children’s culture, theme parks and tourism, and debates over technological developments such as genetic engineering;
- rhetorical strategies and the framing of environmental issues and portrayal of environmental activists in the print
media, television, documentary and feature films;

- the use of electronic media (including video and the internet) and performance (theatre, dance, puppetry, ritual) by activists, in a variety of social and environmental movements;
- recent ecocentric and socio-ecological developments in the visual arts (including Earth and ecological art), music (from popular music to soundscape art), and theatre and performance art;
- literary and media depictions of utopian (ecotopian) and dystopian (eco-apocalyptic) environmental imagery.

This year's course will focus in particular on (1) the visual arts, including the growing field of "eco-art," (2) music and the recent growth of "ecomusicology," and (3) the idea of "ecological media" or "ecomedia culture."

COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. The course will introduce conceptual and analytical tools useful for understanding contemporary cultural practices through an ecological lens. It will provide opportunities for students to use these tools in analyses of cultural phenomena and in production of communicative or creative media objects.
2. More specifically, the course will introduce students to the fields of environmental cultural studies, ecocriticism, ecomedia studies, ecomusicology, and the eco-arts.
3. The course is especially aimed at undergraduate seniors and graduate students who are developing thesis work involving cultural analysis or cultural production; students with an environmental focus who are considering work in the arts, literary, communication, media, or cultural policy fields; and students in the cultural or communication fields who are interested in applying their skills to environmental themes. For all these students, the course aims to provide a forum for the development and refinement of ideas, methods, and activities.

COURSE READING

Required reading
4. Additional readings will be made available electronically (through Blackboard teaching software).

Recommended general background reading (available at bookstore and/or library reserve)

ASSESSMENT

Assessment will consist of the following (total points add up to 100):

1. Attendance & class participation 20
2. Reading responses (3 @ 5 pts. each) 15
3. Class presentation (on an eco-artist or musical performer/group) 5
4. Critical analysis paper & presentation (proposal: 5, paper: 15, presentation: 5) 25
5. Class quizzes (3 @ 5 pts. each) 15
6. Performance, media production, or policy project 20
1. **Attendance, reading, & participation** (20 pts.)

The course will take a seminar format, and readings and class discussions will be of primary importance to the success of the class. Students are expected to attend all classes and to do all required readings in preparation for their discussion in class. Students are also expected to stay up to date on blog discussions (in Blackboard). Responses to blog postings will constitute a part of a student’s participation grade. Students are expected to participate in class discussions in an informed and respectful manner that contributes to the collective “thinking through” of the issues raised.

You are encouraged to keep a journal of unfamiliar terms and to look these up in a dictionary of cultural or critical theory or to bring these up in class for clarification. You are also encouraged to look for and bring in found objects such as advertisements, photographs, or brief video clips that illustrate themes from the course (see *Uncommon Ground* for examples of these).

If you cannot make it to a class, you should notify me ahead of time. Those who miss more than two classes without a valid medical or emergency reason will automatically fail the course.

2. **Reading responses** (3 @ 5 pts. = 15 pts.)

Each student will be responsible for preparing three 200-300 word written responses to readings, which will be shared in advance of classes in order to initiate discussion of those readings. These responses should shed interesting insight onto the readings by bringing them into dialogue with other perspectives studied in the course and/or by incorporating background information on the author or context in which the reading was written, its historical impact, and/or its cultural reception. For a full grade, these written responses must be shared on the course blog by Monday morning at 9 a.m. prior to the class in which the readings are to be discussed.

3. **Class presentation on an eco-artist or musical performer/group** (5 pts.)

Each student will be responsible for preparing a 5-10 minute presentation on an eco-artist or musical performer/group. These will be delivered either on March 18 (eco-art) or March 25 (eco-music).

4. **Critical analysis paper & presentation on an ecologically relevant art, media, or cultural campaign/event/object** (25 pts.)

Each student will be expected to complete a research paper or report critically analyzing an ecologically-themed or ecologically-relevant cultural or media product, advocacy group, campaign, event, or other form of ecologically-relevant cultural communication, based on the critical approaches studied in the course, and to make a brief classroom report based on it. This can be done either singly or in groups, according to topics. Group work will carry length and depth requirements that vary accordingly; see below.

This assignment consists of three components:

i. **One-page proposal** (worth 5 pts., due February 18): This should outline the object of your analysis, your specific method(s) of analysis, a rationale for choosing this method in relation to your object, and possible outcomes.

ii. **Class presentation** (early April, worth 5 pts.). You will be expected to briefly (no more than 5 minutes) present the results of your analysis. Since your time will be limited, it is expected that you will convey information using visuals, such as a handout, poster, or brief Power Point presentation.

ii. **Paper** (worth 15 pts., due March 18): These should be written in a scholarly format, with a complete bibliography, and should consist of the following sections:
   (a) **Brief introduction** stating the topic and thesis (no more than one paragraph).
   (b) **Description** of the object, product, organization, or campaign, providing some historical background where necessary (no more than 2-3 paragraphs).
   (c) **In-depth analysis** of the object. This should refer to the different moments within its “cultural circuit” – i.e., its production (and production context), distribution, consumption, and so forth – and should reflect on the relative success or failure of the product, campaign, or practice in communicating an environmental
message, generating enhanced environmental awareness, or bringing about social or environmental change. (This should be the longest section of the paper. We will discuss the “cultural circuit” idea in class.)

(d) Brief conclusion summarizing your evaluation of your topic as a form of environmental communication (normally one paragraph).

(e) Full bibliography of all sources, in APA, MLA, Chicago style or another academically recognized style. It is expected that several sources will come from course readings or from the extended course bibliography.

(f) (optional) Appendix, including any materials used (e.g., photographs, notes from public meetings, audio scripts, audio materials, etc.).

Suggested length: If you are working individually, your paper should be about 1400-1800 words, or about 5-7 pages in length, typed, 1.5-spaced, in Times New Roman 12-point or comparably sized font. If working in a group, the length and depth of analysis should vary accordingly, i.e., for 2 students 2200-3000 words; for 3 students, 3000-4000 words; etc. But quality should always take precedence over quantity.

5. **In-class quizzes** (2 @ 5 pts. each + mid-term @ 10 pts. = 20 pts.)

Three in-class, multiple-choice or short-answer quizzes will cover material from class lectures and readings. These will take place on February 11, March 18, and April 22.

6. **Group performance, media production, or policy project** (15 pts.)

Students will undertake a project in groups of two to four students. The intent of the project will be three-fold: (1) to create some form of “environmentally communicative” cultural or media product, (2) to reflect on what and how it communicates its message and to evaluate its success, (3) to present it in some form to the class. Possible media include text (e.g., short story, essay for a popular magazine, op-ed piece for a newspaper), film or video, photography, website, audio work (such as a radio program), art or media installation, theatrical performance, etc.

A one- to two-page proposal outlining the group members, objectives, methods, and rationale will be due by or before March 25. Class presentations will be scheduled for the final two classes. A final group report (500-1000 words; details to be provided) and self-evaluation (300-500 words) will be due by May 8.

**OR**

**Alternative option: Individual paper/project** (15 pts.)

This alternative option should build on a student’s critical analysis paper (see above) in the direction of proactive cultural production or theory: e.g., a policy paper outlining recommendations (for instance, to an organization or local or national body with power to carry out the recommendations) on a topic critically analyzed in the earlier paper; a theoretical or philosophical paper in which the student develops an alternative to a situation analyzed in the critical analysis paper; or a creative work involving text and/or another medium (see list of media in 6a). In the case of the latter, the creative piece should include an introduction and self-reflection no less than 600 words in length contextualizing the work within the themes of the course and providing a rationale for it within those themes. It is strongly suggested that this paper build on the analysis presented in Assignment #1 (but, of course, variations may be entertained).

A one-page proposal outlining the form or format and objectives will be due on March 25. The paper or project will be due on May 8.
### SCHEDULE OF TOPICS, READINGS & ACTIVITIES

This schedule is tentative and subject to change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>January 14</th>
<th>INTRODUCTION &amp; COURSE OVERVIEW: THE ANTHROPOCENE, CULTURAL STUDIES, &amp; THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>Debating the human role in Earth processes. Why is culture important for the environment? Introduction to cultural studies as field and as practice: studying the production, reproduction, and circulation of cultural meanings in contemporary society. Relationship of cultural studies to anthropology, sociology, literary studies, media studies. Introduction to environmental communication, ecocriticism, and environmental cultural studies.</td>
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<tr>
<th>January 21</th>
<th>WHAT WAS NATURE?</th>
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<td>What is nature? Has nature changed, and, if so, what was it up until recently? How do we know what we know about nature, and who “speaks for” it? Does (or should) science have a privileged relationship to nature compared to other ways of knowing, such as art, myth, religion, poetry, or traditional/rural knowledge and livelihood? If so, why? Is the idea of nature a universal idea or a modern Western social construct? What is the debate over the social construction of nature? How has the idea of nature been used historically to make distinctions between species, people, genders, races, classes?</td>
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<td>Required reading</td>
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<td>Supplementary</td>
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<tr>
<th>January 28</th>
<th>DREAMING NATURE: LANDSCAPE, MEMORY, IDENTITY</th>
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<td>How have societies shaped their collective identities in relation to the natural world? What is the role of work and livelihood in the constitution of place-based identities? How have nature and landscape been mythicized as sacred, homeland, heartland, pilgrimage site, and how have these become tools for struggles over land and identity? Is Western culture inherently nature-phobic, or does it have its own myths of rootedness in place and landscape?</td>
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<td>Reading</td>
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<tr>
<th>February 4</th>
<th>VIEWING NATURE: LANDSCAPE ART, PHOTOGRAPHY, &amp; THE VIEW FROM THE ROAD</th>
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<td>Concepts in Western visual studies: the sublime, beautiful, and picturesque; the gaze; the magisterial gaze. How has Western society privileged the visual mode of perception and “enframed” nature? What was the role of landscape visibility in the construction of American nationalism and the making of the American West? How has nature been constructed as an object of visual pleasure? How is this a “gendered” gaze? How has Western visibility influenced the conservation/environmental movement, and how has this changed in the age of cars &amp; mass/global tourism?</td>
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### Reading


### Supplementary


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#### February 11

**CONSUMING NATURE:**

**RECREATION, “DISNIFICATION,” CHILDRENS’ CULTURE, & ANIMALS**

What is the relationship between the environmental movement and consumerism (including “green consumerism”), tourism, childrens’ culture, Disney? Is nature recreation an elite or white phenomenon? What is the “theming” of nature? Why do people (and kids) love whales and dolphins so much?

**Reading**

3. Donna Lee King, ”Selling environmentalism to kids,” *Doing Their Share to Save the Planet* (Rutgers Univ. Press, 1995), 29-53.

**In-class quiz #1**

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#### February 18

**CONTESTING NATURE:**

**ENVIRONMENTALISM, POPULAR CULTURE, & THE STRUGGLE FOR HEGEMONY**

How have environmentalists been portrayed in mass media, and how does this portrayal affect environmentalism and its perception in society at large? What is the “public sphere” and how is it changing in a digital media world? What are ideology and hegemony, and how are they related to mass and digital media? Are media audiences active or passive? How can viewers shape the meanings produced in media? What was/is the debate over the “death of environmentalism”? Should the environmental movement be replaced by something else (larger, more broad-based, more social-justice oriented, etc.)? How can environmentalists make use of mass, electronic, and/or alternative media to build viable & effective coalitions with other groups for the transformation of society?

**Reading**


**Supplementary**

Robert Cox, “Environmental Advocacy Campaigns,” *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere*.


Free Press.net, ‘Who owns the media?’, [http://www.freepress.net/content/ownership](http://www.freepress.net/content/ownership).

Media ownership chart at [www.mediacommons.org/ownership/chart.shtml](http://www.mediacommons.org/ownership/chart.shtml)

**Critical analysis paper proposal due**
### February 25
**ECO-ART:**  
**FROM GARDENS TO EARTHWORKS TO ECOLOGICAL ART**  
How have landscape design, gardening, and parks evolved over the centuries, and what does this say about ideas of nature? What is “land art,” “earth art,” and “ecological art”? What is art as social practice? What are artists doing today to address the ecological and climate crises?  
**Reading**  
1. Linda Weintraub, *To Life!* Pp. 5-50

### March 4  
**SPRING BREAK – NO CLASS**

### March 11  
**ECO-ART PRACTICE**  
Student presentations on eco-art pioneers and explorers.  
**Reading**  
1. Linda Weintraub, *To Life!* Read: Ant Farm, Beuys, Haacke, Harrisons, Sonfist, Ukeles, and at least 2 other sections from “Twentieth-century Eco-Art Pioneers” chapters; and your choice of 8 sections from “Twenty-First-Century Eco Art Explorers” chapter.  

### March 18  
**TOPIC TBA**  
Mid-term quiz  
Meet in groups to develop project proposals

### March 25  
**ACOUSTIC ECOLOGY & THE ECOLOGY OF MUSIC**  
How have musicians and composers responded to the ecological crisis? What is acoustic ecology? What is ecomusicology?  
**Reading**  
**Project proposals due**

### April 1  
**ECOLOGICAL THEMES IN POPULAR MUSIC**  
Student presentations on musicians and composers pursuing ecological themes.  
**Reading**  
1. Pedelty, *Ecomusicology*, ch. 2 (“The musical nation”) and ch. 3 (“Regional geography in song”)
### April 8

**LOCAL NATURES: TOWARD LOCAL FOOD, MUSIC, ART & PERFORMANCE CULTURES**

How have environmental and social justice movements made use of elements of performance, theater, and drama in activism?

What are the virtues of localism and “slowness” in food and cultural activism? What are its limitations? How can cities and communities

**Reading**

1. Pedelty, *Ecomusicology*, ch. 4 (“Local music”) and Conclusion
2. TBA

**Critical analysis papers due**

### April 15

**CULTURE JAMMING, INDEPENDENT MEDIA, & SUBCULTURAL ECOLOGIES**

Traditions of counterculture: from Romantics and bohemians to hippies, punks, and anti-globalization activists. Is ‘hipness’ a threat to mainstream (capitalist) culture, or its vanguard?

How have environmental and social justice activists made use of alternative and new media? Audio, video, and internet activism and production techniques; ‘culture jammers’ and media guerillas.

**Reading**

TBA

**Brief paper presentations**

### April 22

**TECHNONATURE: GLOBAL MEDIA, SIMULATED NATURE, & DIGITAL ECOLOGIES**

How have film, television, satellite imagery & digital media portrayed nature and the nonhuman? How is the ‘ecology’ of visual & new media systems evolving today, and what is its relationship to ‘natural ecologies’?

Can nature be recreated? What happens to nature in an era of simulations, theme parks, artificial/digital life, genetic engineering?

**Reading**


Fernando Elichirigoity, “The emergence of the global Earth” and “A new regime of machine vision,” *Planet Management: Limits to Growth, Computer Simulation, and the Emergence of Global Spaces* (Northwestern Univ. Press, 1999).

### April 29

**GROUP PRESENTATIONS / EXHIBITION**
Environmental Communication & Cultural Studies (general; incl. Ecocriticism)
Udin, Lisa and Pter Hobbs, eds. “Nature Loving,” **Invisible Culture 9** (special issue), [http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/issue_q1titles.html](http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/issue_q1titles.html).
Wilson, Alex 1991. **The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez.** Toronto: Between the Lines.

Cultural and Historical Perspectives on Nature
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aronczyk, Melissa</td>
<td>“Taking the SUV to a place it’s never been before’: SUV ads and the consumption of nature.”</td>
<td>Invisible Culture 9 (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schreper, Susan</td>
<td>Nature's Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism.</td>
<td>U. Press of Kansas, 2005</td>
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### Memory, Heritage, Landscape, Indigeneity

- **Basso, Keith H.** 1996. 'Wisdom sits in places: notes on a western Apache landscape', in S. Feld and K.H. Basso (eds), Senses of Place. Sanya Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research.
- **Ivakhiv, Adrian.** 2006. “Stoking the Heart of (a Certain) Europe: Crafting Hybrid Identity in Ukrainian-European Borderlands.” Spaces of Identity 6 (2), 11-44.

### Environmental Visual Studies

- **Aronczyk, Melissa.** ““Taking the SUV to a place it’s never been before’: SUV ads and the consumption of nature.” Invisible Culture 9 (2005),
Week 5

**Media Studies**


[www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net)

[www.fair.org](http://www.fair.org)

[www.fair.org/counterspin/](http://www.fair.org/counterspin/)

Week 6

**Environmentalism & Media**


Delli Carpini, Michael and Bruce A. Williams, “Fictional' and 'non-fictional' television celebrates Earth Day: or, politics is comedy plus pretense,” *Cultural Studies* 8:1 (1994), pp. 74-96.

Week 7

**Consumerism & the Environment**

Bednar, Bob. Snapshot Semiotics Project. www.southwestern.edu/~bednar/snapshotsemiotics/


Best, Steven and Douglas Kellner, “Modernity, Commodification, and the Spectacle From Marx through Debord into the Postmodern,” The Postmodern Adventure.


Cypher, Jennifer and Eric Higgs, ‘Colonizing the imagination: Disney’s Wilderness Lodge,’ in B. Herzog erot, From Virgin Land to Disney World (Rodopi, 2001).


King, Donna Lee, ‘Selling environmentalism to kids,’ Doing Their Share to Save the Planet (Rutgers Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 29-53.


Week 8

**Cultural Studies of Animals**
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Week 8</th>
<th>‘Nature Matters’ Conference: Keynote Speakers</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wilson, Alex. “Looking at the Non-Human: Nature Movies and TV,’ ch. 4 in <em>The Culture of Nature</em>.</td>
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<th>Week 9</th>
<th>Green Film Studies</th>
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Beardsley, John. Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape.

Global, Artificial, Simulated and Digital ‘Nature’
Luke, Timothy. “Environmental Emulations: Terraforming Technologies and the Tourist Trade at Biosphere 2” (ch. 5) and “Worldwatching at the Limits of Growth” (ch. 4) in Ecocritique.

Week 10

Gardens, Landscapes, and Eco-Art
Beardsley, John. Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape.
Week 11

**Sound, Theater, Performance, and the Environment**


McShane, Megan. 'The manifest disharmony of ephemeral culture: Art, ecology, and waste management in American culture,' in B. Herzogenrath, From **Virgin Land to Disney World** (Rodopi, 2001).


http://www.acousticecology.org/
### Week 12
**Counterculture and Culture Jamming**


[http://www.adbusters.org/home/](http://www.adbusters.org/home/)

### Week 13
**Utopia, Dystopia, and the Environmental Imagination (theory)**


