

University of Vermont ~ Fall 2013

ENVS 295-C



ECOPOLITICS & THE CINEMA*

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Consultation hours: Tue 11:00 am-12:00 noon, Wed 2:00-4:00 pm

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* a.k.a. *Ecomedia Studies, Ecology—Film—Philosophy*

(see "A Note on the Course Title," next page)

CATALOG DESCRIPTION:

This seminar course will examine the intersections between films/filmmaking and ecological politics and philosophy. It will apply the tools of ecocritical cultural studies and ecologically informed philosophy to cinematic practice and to representations of the relationship between humans and the natural world. Themes to be explored include the material ecologies of film production and consumption, the ecopolitics of Hollywood and its alternatives, representations of landscape and national identity, the imperial and colonial gaze, film and sense of place, ecological utopias and dystopias, cinematic animals, the eco-documentary, and feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives on film and ecology.

COURSE THEMES

How have movies changed our perception of ourselves, the Earth, and the relationship between the two? How are they continuing to do that as we plunge into an era of digital media – a world of slippery, morphing, dynamic and interactive images that are ever more immersive, even as they bear less and less relationship to the physical world of objects, landscapes, and other organisms? How do they generate meanings as well as affects – feelings, emotional responses, desires, motivations, sensibilities, and identities – related to nature, place, ecology, and the nonhuman? How might they facilitate a more ecological sensibility and underpin an ecological politics?

This course will examine the intersections between films and filmmaking, ecology, and philosophy. It will apply the tools of ecocritical cultural/media studies and ecologically informed philosophy to cinematic practice and to representations of the relationship between humans and the natural world. We will explore and discuss a wide range of film forms and genres, including Hollywood blockbusters, Disney animation, nature documentaries, science-fiction cinema, along with foreign, independent, ethnographic, experimental, and art films. We will contextualize these within the evolving history of environmental and sociopolitical movements, including Romanticism and the American conservation movement, the 1960s New Left and counterculture, Third World and indigenous peoples movements, critiques of neoliberal globalization, and the climate justice movement. Screenings will be accompanied by readings across a range of critical theories and interpretive methods. In particular, the course will draw on ecophilosophical approaches (rooted in the processual and relational philosophies of A. N. Whitehead, C. S. Peirce, and Gilles Deleuze) to understanding how visual media affect us and how we might better use them to affect the world.

***A note on the course title:** This course has been taught since 2005 under the title “Ecopolitics and the Cinema.” In its most recent iteration, in summer of 2013, I changed the title to “Ecology, Film, Philosophy” to better reflect how the course had evolved, particularly in conjunction with the new course textbook, *Ecologies of the Moving Image*. However, since that title was not approved across the colleges, the ENVS Program has retained the old title for this year’s rendition of the course. Both titles apply equally well as long as you keep in mind that by “ecopolitics” we mean everything to do with how humans relate to each other and to the nonhuman world, and by “ecophilosophy” we mean how we think about those same things.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Students who fulfill the expectations of the course can expect to gain the following:

1. A broad understanding of and appreciation for the history of cinema, especially of cinematic depictions of nature, landscape, environment, ecology, animals, and ecological crisis (dystopia) and possibility (“ecotopia”), from the 1900s through to today.
2. An introduction to ecocriticism and ecophilosophy as these relate to the visual arts in general and to cinema in particular. This will include an in-depth understanding of how ecocritics have addressed film and moving images and how the fields of ecomedia and ecocinema studies are developing.
3. A theoretical and practical understanding of the process-relational philosophical perspective on cinema, art, and life. This perspective draws on the traditions of processual, relational, ecological, pragmatist, and “new materialist” and “speculative realist” philosophies as these are developing today.

READING

Required reading

1. Adrian Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 2013).
2. Other readings to be made available in class.

Suggested background reading

1. Nadia Bozak, *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources* (Rutgers University Press, 2011).
2. Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt, ed., *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2012).

COURSE EXPECTATIONS

1. Attendance and 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 the issues raised. Students should bring in at least two substantive questions or discussion points about the readings to every class (after the first week; these can be directly related to your response journals). If you cannot make it to a class, you should notify me ahead of time. Those who miss more than two classes without prior notification will automatically fail the course. 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 last class.

2. Weekly reading & response journals (30%)

Film and reading responses are to be handed in on most class days during the length of the course. These should normally be 1.5 to 2 pages in length (typed, double- or 1.5- spaced). Specific questions or prompts will be announced in class. Readings (many of which will be dense and theoretical) will average about 50 pages per week.

3. In-class quizzes (2 x 10% = 20%)

There will be two in-class quizzes, consisting of multiple-choice and short answer questions. These will take place on Oct. 14 and Nov. 11.

4. Term paper (30%)

Each student will be expected to complete a paper critically analyzing a film or set of films of your choice utilizing analytical methods from the course. See Appendix, pp. 341-5, in *Ecologies of the Moving Image* for an idea of the kinds of questions you will be asked to choose from.

A 1 to 2 page proposal (worth 5% of the course grade) will be due in class on November 4. 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.

The final paper (worth 25%) will be due on December 9, one week after the final class. This should be written in a scholarly format, with a complete bibliography, and 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 topic as a form of environmental communication (normally one paragraph).
- (e) Full bibliography of all sources, in APA, MLA, Chicago or other academically recognized style.

Suggested length: roughly 1600 words in length, or about five 1.5-spaced pages (6-7 dbl-spaced pages), typed, in Times New Roman 12-point or comparably sized font.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS, SCREENINGS, & READINGS

This is a **tentative** list of topics, screenings, and accompanying readings. All final dates, screenings, readings, and assignments will be announced in class.

Aug 26

INTRODUCTION: THE ECO-IMAGE

Themes: The nature of the moving image. Environmental visibility. Eco-nostalgia & eco-apocalypse: Imagining a bleak future & an idealized past. What to expect from the course & the text.

Screenings: Selections from *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Soylent Green*, *Silent Running*; selected short films

Sep 2

LABOR DAY HOLIDAY (no class) – Please read ahead for next week’s class!

Sep 9

THE PROCESS-RELATIONAL MODEL

Themes: Cinema’s three ecologies (material, social, mental/perceptual). C. S. Peirce’s categories of experience. The cinematic experience.

Screenings: Selections from *Baraka*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Solaris*, *Contact*, and short films by the Lumiere brothers and Stan Brakhage

Reading: *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, pp. vii-48 (Preface, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2 to end of “A process-relational ontology”); Mesle, “Experience all the way down,” “Reality as relational process.”

Sep 16

THE CINEMA ‘ZONE’

Themes: The cinematic experience (continued). The process-relational model of experience. Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*. Scientific experiments, urban decay, and “worlds without us.”

Screenings: *Stalker*

Readings: *EMI*, ch. 2, pp. 49-67; Weisman, excerpt from *A World Without Us*.

Sept 23

GEOMORPHISM 1: LANDSCAPE & IDENTITY (TERRITORIALIZATION)

Themes: Cinematic geomorphism. Western traditions of landscape representation. Westerns and the American landscape. Ecological disasters and transformations.

Screenings: *Up the Yangtze*; selections from *The Searchers*, *Earth*, *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, *The River*

Reading: *EMI*, ch. 3, pp. 69-107

Sept 30

GEOMORPHISM 2: WORLD AS SPECTACLE, SENSATION, & DETERRITORIALIZATION

Themes: Global travel and cinematic tourism. Romanticism, road movies, car culture, and “freedom.” The 1960s and the counterculture. The database aesthetic.

Screenings: Selections from *Dead Man*, *Days of Heaven*, *Easy Rider*, *Deliverance*, *Baraka*, *Picture of Light*, *Prospero’s Books*, and short films by Stan Brakhage and James Benning

Reading: *EMI*, ch. 3, pp. 107-140

Oct 7

ANTHROPOMORPHISM 1: ETHNOGRAPHY & THE IMPERIAL GAZE

Themes: Early ethnographic films & the colonial/imperial gaze. *King Kong* & its legacy. Ethnographic cinema, reverse ethnography, mockumentary, & the deconstructive gaze.

Screenings: *Aguirre the Wrath of God*; selections from *Chang*, *Nanook of the North*, *King Kong (1933)*, *Apocalypse Now*, *The New World*, *Cannibal Tours*, *Un chien délicieux*

Reading: ch. 4, pp. 141-171

Oct 14

ANTHROPOMORPHISM 2: CINEMAS OF BECOMING

Themes: Cinemas of becoming. Indigenous “visual sovereignty.” First person cinema. Romanticism, the New Left, & the back-to-the-land movement. Brecht’s epic theatre. Network narratives.

Screenings: *Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000*; selections from *Sunless*, *Daughters of the Dust*, *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*

Reading: EMI ch. 5, pp. 171-192

In-Class Quiz #1

Oct 21

BIOMORPHISM 1: ANIMALS & THE SPECTACLE OF NATURE

Themes: Animation. Disney & the popular imagination of nature and animals. The hunting debate & conservation ethics. Monstrous nature. Spectacular nature.

Screenings: *My Neighbor Totoro*; selections from *Bambi*, *Winged Migration*, *March of the Penguins*, *Planet Earth*, *Wolfen*, *Zoo*

Reading: EMI ch. 5, pp. 193-223

Oct 28

BIOMORPHISM 2: BOUNDARY CROSSERS & THE ETHICS OF THE WILD

Themes: Animals in film. Theriomorphism (becoming animal) and the human-animal boundary.

Screenings: *Grizzly Man*; selections from *Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*

Reading: EMI ch. 5, pp. 223-252

Nov 4

ECO-TRAUMA & THE ETHICS OF GLOBAL DOCUMENTARY

Themes: The politics and ethics of eco-disaster. Romantic and anti-romantic depictions of toxic & embattled landscapes. Lake Victoria: “Darwin’s dreampond” today. Africa, underdevelopment, & capitalist globalization.

Screenings: *Darwin’s Nightmare*; selections from *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia*, *Children of Men*, *Lessons of Darkness*, *Petropolis*, *The Cove*

Reading: EMI ch. 6, pp. 253-284

Nov 11

ECO-TRAUMA, ECOTOPIA, & THE POWER OF THE IMAGE

Themes: Process-relational ethics, aesthetics, and "ecologics." Review: bringing the topics together in analyzing a film. The final paper.

Screening: *Beasts of the Southern Wild*; selections from *The Tree of Life*, *Melancholia*

Reading: EMI ch. 6, pp. 284-325

Nov 18

ECOTOPIA, RECYCLED FILM, & THE FUTURE

Themes: Commodity production, waste, & inequality. Digital cinema. Recycled cinema.

Screenings: *The Gleaners and I*; selections from *Sans Soleil (Sunless)*, various videos

Reading: EMI, Afterword (pp. 327-340)

Dec 2

CONCLUSION

Student-Curated Short Film Fest

Reading: TBA

Dec 9

Final Paper Due