

ENVIRONMENT IN WORLD CINEMA



Course director: Prof. Adrian Ivakhiv, aivakhiv@uvm.edu (656-0180)

Office: Room 211, Bittersweet House, 153 South Prospect Street (at Main St.)

Consultation hours: Tue. 3:00-4:00 pm, Thur. 10:00 am-12:00 pm

Appointments: Book through Cathy Trivieres (x. 64055, envs@uvm.edu) or Outlook

Class meetings: Mondays 4:05-7:05 pm, classroom TBA

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Overview

This course examines cinematic depictions of the relationship between cultural identity and the natural world (environment, place, landscape) from around the world. We will draw on ecocriticism, postcolonial/decolonial cultural theory, and other forms of cultural analysis to critically assess how filmmakers have depicted their own and others' cultures in relationship to changing environments and to socio-ecological challenges. We will focus especially on the 'aesthetic diversity' found in traditions of magic realism, poetic and experimental cinema, ethnographic representations in national and international cinema traditions, and first-person essay films, with an emphasis on the theme of changing cultural relations with the natural environment. The class will examine films from around the world, including Asia, Africa, Australasia, Eastern Europe, and the Americas.

Background

This course is premised on two understandings: the first environmental, the second cinematic.

The first premise is that *selfhood, subjectivity, and identity are inherently intermeshed with 'land' and 'environment'*: that is, it is almost impossible to fully extricate oneself or one's culture from the surroundings that help shape them. Human history is a history of different kinds of engagements between people and the biological, material, and 'more than human' worlds around them. While modern, western people find it easy to think of themselves as individuals who are free to live anywhere and to do anything, this luxury is neither available nor necessarily desirable for most people in the world (and historically it is rather aberrant). Relationship to place, land, and/or territory is a significant variable in most people's sense of who they are. At a time when environmental problems are deepening

and when the relationship between people and the global environment seems unstable and unreliable, this relationship between people and the earth becomes an open question. We will not assume, for instance (as is fairly common), that people or cultures are active agents while land, environment, 'natural resources,' et al. are merely passive objects to be shaped, managed, manipulated, bought and sold, and recreationally or touristically consumed by humans. Instead, we will leave open the possibility that environments *act on people* as much as people act on environments—that the relationship between the two is mutually open, complex, dynamic, and negotiated over time. This is a lesson we will take from indigenous and decolonial movements around the world.

The second premise is that *cinema is a form of storytelling and imagination that both reflects and shapes these relations between subject(s) and environment(s), 'cultures' and 'natures,' people(s) and land(s)*. The cinematic arts show us people in specific places, landscapes, and territories, and their way of showing those things is relevant to how we make sense of those relations. Since, for most human cultures, relationship with place or landscape has been integral to cultural identity, cinematic representation of such relations is important to how we imagine those relations today. While many films have depicted indigenous people's relationships to nature 'from the outside'—in ethnographic films made by outsiders *for* outsiders—we will also look at how colonized and indigenous groups have taken up cameras themselves to create 'post-ethnographic' images and narratives for themselves and others.

Key questions for the course will therefore be these: *What can cinema offer for reconceptualizing relations between people and land, people and earth, to make those relationships more socially and ecologically just and sustainable over the long term? What are the politics by which people and lands are depicted cinematically, and how can those politics be altered through different production arrangements and cinematic methodologies?*

Our emphasis in this course will be on modes of environmental representation as reflected in different national, aesthetic, ethnographic, documentary, and experimental traditions and practices. Themes to be explored include the tensions between tradition and modernization; metropolis versus countryside; realism versus poetic, 'magic realist,' non-linear, and experimental forms; ethnographic 'authenticity' versus 'cultural appropriation'; settler/colonial versus indigenous perceptions of nature and land; and artistic individualism versus collective, class, national, or indigenous production values. Please note that the course will **not** focus on 'environmental films,' 'eco-documentaries,' or 'ecocinema.' Themes from ecocinema studies will come up in our discussions, but the selection of films will be dictated by the goals outlined above.

Format

Classes will meet once a week for 3 hours. Most weeks we will watch a full-length feature film or several short films or segments, alongside lecture and seminar style discussion. (Typically, the first hour will include introduction of concepts and discussion, while the second and third hours will include a feature screening.) Readings will accompany screenings and classes, and students will be expected to participate in online discussions in Blackboard and to complete weekly writing assignments.

Readings

All required readings will be provided in **Blackboard**. Students may be given a choice of reading the required readings *before* the weekly screening or *after* it (with recommendations being made for both), but will be required to refer to the readings in their reading/screening response journals.

Recommended background reading

These books are not required, but may be useful for getting an in-depth background on course themes.

1. Adrian Ivakhiv, **Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature** (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013).
2. Adam O'Brien, **Film and the Natural Environment: Elements and Atmospheres** (London: Wallflower, 2018).
3. David Melbye, **Landscape Allegory in Cinema: From Wilderness to Wasteland** (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

COURSE EXPECTATIONS & EVALUATION

1. Attendance and participation (20%)

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. Class discussions will take place both in class (especially during the first hour of classes) and in the Blackboard online class discussion site. If you cannot make it to a class, you should notify me ahead of time. **Grade:** 1 pt. per week (x 13) plus 7 pts. total for participation.

2. Weekly reading & response journal (25%)

Film and reading responses are to be submitted in Blackboard **by Monday at noon** before every week's class. Readings (many of them dense and theoretical) will average about 50 pages per week, and reading responses should indicate familiarity with the substance and argumentation of all required readings. Responses should normally be in the range of about 150-250 words in length. They should concisely and effectively articulate a point or points rooted in the readings and screenings and that is suitable for further class discussion. Additional instructions for reading responses, including specific question prompts, may be announced in Blackboard. **Grade:** 1.5 pts. per week for on-time submission (x 12 weeks, less 0.5 pts. per day late) plus 7 pts. for overall quality grade, for a possible total of 25 points.

3. In-class quizzes (15% total)

There will be 4 brief in-class, multiple-choice quizzes. These will be held every 3 to 4 classes (but will otherwise not be announced). They will be based on basic reading and lecture material and are intended as a simple test of your attendance and attentiveness, not of your comprehension or analytical skills. **Grade:** 4 pts. per quiz, for a total of 16 pts. (maxed at 15).

4. Take-home exam (20%)

This will consist mostly of short answer questions, with one or two medium-length, essay-style questions. You will have one week to write it (likely to be in late March or early April). It will cover all readings, screenings, and lecture materials from the course up to that point.

5. Term paper (20%)

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 the *Ecologies of the Moving Image* appendix, especially the section on 'geomorphism', shared in Blackboard, for an idea of the kinds of questions you might choose from.) A **1 to 2 page proposal** will be due in class on **April 8**. 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 will be due on **May 6**, 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 1000 words, or about three 1.5-spaced pages (4-5 dbl-spaced pages), typed, in Times New Roman 12-point or comparably sized font.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE OF THEMES & SCREENINGS

Titles and dates are subject to change

Week	Date	Themes	Feature screening
1	Jan 14	Course Introduction & Overview Classic Landscape Cinema 1: The Hollywood Western	<i>The Searchers</i> (J. Ford, USA, 1956)
	Jan 21	M. L. King Day (no class)	
2	Jan 28	Classic Landscape Cinema 2: India, Between Tradition and Modernity	<i>Pather Panchali (Song of the Little Road)</i> (S. Ray, India, 1955)
3	Feb 4	New Waves & Post-Ethnography: Ukrainian 'Poetic Cinema'	<i>Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors</i> (S. Paradjanov, Ukraine/USSR, 1964)
4	Feb 11	'Third Cinema' & <i>Tropicalismo</i> in Brazil	<i>Macunaima</i> (J. P. de Andrade, Brazil, 1969)
	Feb 18	Presidents Day (no class)	
5	Feb 25	Postcolonial Retrievals: Africa and the World	<i>Heritage of the Griot</i> (D. Kouyaté, Burkina Faso, 1995) and/or <i>Daughters of the Dust</i> (J. Dash, USA, 1990)
6	Mar 4	Culture, Nature, & the Eco-Sublime in Experimental & Art Cinemas	Short films & excerpts by Stan Brakhage, Werner Herzog, Tracey Moffatt, Trinh Minh-Ha, Rose Lowder, Aleksandr Sokurov, Jorge Furtado, et al.
	Mar 11	Spring Recess (no class)	
7	Mar 18	Indigenous Production & 'Fourth Cinema': Inuit Isuma	<i>The Journals of Knud Rasmussen</i> (N. Cohn & Z. Kunuk, Canada, 2006)
8	Mar 25	Animist & Haunted Landscapes: Weerasethakul	<i>Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives</i> (A. Weerasethakul, Thailand, 2006)
9	Apr 1	Animation/Animé/Animism: Miyazaki	<i>Nausicaa, The Warrior of the Wind</i> OR <i>Princess Mononoke</i> (Hayao Miyazaki, Japan, 1984/1994)
10	Apr 8	Buddhist Cinema: Korea	<i>Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East</i> (B. Yong-Kyun, South Korea, 1989)
11	Apr 15	Animism & Eco-Dystopia	<i>Beasts of the Southern Wild</i> (Ben Zeitlin, et al, USA, 2012)
12	Apr 22	Globalization & the New China	<i>Still Life</i> (Jia Zhang-ke, China, 2006)
13	Apr 29	The Many Faces of Contemporary Eco-Documentary	Excerpts from <i>Anthropocene</i> (J. Baichwal, E. Burtynsky, and N. de Pencier, Canada, 2018), <i>Yuma: Land of Friends</i> (C. Caycedo, Colombia, 2014), <i>Sweetgrass</i> (L. Castaing-Taylor & I. Barbash, USA, 2009), <i>Leviathan</i> (L. Castaing-Taylor & V. Parabel, USA, 2013), <i>Homo Sapiens</i> (N. Geyrhalter, Austria, 2016), and others

APPENDIX: COURSE POLICIES

1. ABSENCES

Students are expected to attend all classes, unless you have an excused absence. Attendance will be taken, and unexcused absences will factor into your final grade. (Absences are not excused unless they are personally cleared with the instructor by phone or email.) If you miss a class, please ask another student for assistance in catching up on the material. We expect you to make it a commitment to attend every class, both for your own learning and to contribute to the community of learning in the group.

2. WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS & LATENESS

Unless otherwise specified or agreed upon beforehand, all written work should be submitted in print, not electronically. It should be typewritten, at least 1-1/2 spaced (or double-spaced), in a common font style (such as Times New Roman or Arial) no less than 11-point in size, and with at least 1" margins for comments. Pages should be numbered and stapled together. Please spell-check and proofread your work, and use inclusive language (i.e. be conscious of your use of gendered pronouns and referents, using "people" or "humanity" instead of "man", "he or she" or "they" instead of simply "he," and so on). All written work should be turned in on time, i.e. at the beginning of class on the day the assignment is due. Late work is subject to penalties, with grades dropping half a letter grade each day your work is late unless you have a valid medical excuse or receive an extension from me beforehand.

3. RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

UVM supports students' active involvement in their religious/faith communities. Students wishing to be excused from class participation or assigned work during their religious holidays, with accommodations made for making up the missed work, must submit a documented list of such holidays by the end of the second week of classes.

3. CLASS LAPTOP & PHONE USE

This class will have a "no personal screens" policy, with specified exceptions. This means that students should not be using their own personal electronic devices (laptops, smart phones, et al.) unless requested in advance for Access purposes or similar need, or unless it is announced by the instructor that we will use such devices for a specified class purpose. Students allowed to use such devices should take care to minimize distractions for other students in class. We may of course use a single screen/projector for pedagogical purposes in class.

4. COLLABORATION & PLAGIARISM

You are encouraged to work with others in the class on your assignments, sharing resources and ideas and helping each other with direction, focus, clarity, and personal support. Please make an effort to get to know your peers. Many religious and environmental initiatives have been built on collaborative networking, and such activity is encouraged. At the same time, UVM's commitment to academic honesty will be followed. This means that unless otherwise stated, all written assignments should be your own. If you draw on other sources, they should be cited properly to give appropriate credit. If you work with other students to prepare for an exam, your written answers should be individually constructed, not copied from each other or shared notes. Work that appears to be plagiarized will be given no credit and students will be asked to meet with the instructor to explain the situation. Plagiarism at UVM constitutes grounds for academic suspension; don't do it. Further information on plagiarism can be found in UVM's Statement on Academic Integrity; see <http://www.uvm.edu/~uvmppg/ppg/student/acadintegrity.pdf>. See also the Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities at www.uvm.edu/~uvmppg/ppg/student/studentcode.pdf.

5. RESPECTFUL CLASS CONDUCT

The mission of the University of Vermont includes two components: the creation, evaluation, sharing, and application of knowledge; and the preparation of students “to be accountable leaders who will bring to their work *dedication to the global community*, a grasp of complexity, effective problem-solving and communication skills, and an enduring *commitment to learning and ethical conduct*” (emphases added; see www.uvm.edu/president/?Page=mission.html). The commitment of “dedication to the global community” is reflected in the D2 diversity requirement, which this course aims to fulfill (though not formally a D2 course). Since spirituality and religion are often deeply personal matters, it is important that students feel welcome and safe in this class to express their views on the subjects of our study. Respectful treatment of others and their views is key to this (and not only because it is consistent with the “ethical conduct” aimed for in the University mission). I will do my best to uphold it in my own behavior, and will expect a similar effort from each student.

As a public university, UVM is also committed to the protection of free speech (which is guaranteed by the First Amendment, except in instances of defamation, obscenity, criminal conduct, or a “clear and present danger” to incitement of harm, injury, and violence). The classroom, however, is not a forum for the airing of any views whatsoever. It is a forum for learning about specific topics, and this is best done within a respectful and open-minded setting in which divergent views can be discussed, critically considered, clarified, and evaluated. In seeking a balance between freedom of expression and respect for difference, I have found the following principles to be most helpful, and I suggest that we adopt them in our class:

- (1) Seek to *understand* other points of view, even if you disagree with them;
- (2) Where disagreement or criticism seem warranted, seek to engage *constructively* and to criticize ideas or behaviors (at most) but not the *people* who hold them;
- (3) When in doubt, practice kindness and civility.

Disrespect of individuals or groups, such as would create an atmosphere of hostility or fear, should not be tolerated in a classroom seminar. If such disrespect emerges, students should feel free to “flag” it without fear of retribution. In the end, however, it is in engaging with differences in perspective and expression that we develop our capacity for “ethical conduct” in a “global community” that is complex and deeply heterogeneous in its values, beliefs, and practices. Through practicing kindness with each other, we learn how to engage in civil conversation with our peers and to model such conversation in our country and in the world.

See also:

- UVM grade appeals policy: <http://www.uvm.edu/~uvmppg/ppg/student/gradeappeals.pdf>
- UVM FERPA Rights Disclosure (student records privacy rights): <http://www.uvm.edu/~uvmppg/ppg/student/ferpa.pdf>
- UVM policy on disability certification & student support: <http://www.uvm.edu/~uvmppg/ppg/student/disability.pdf>