

CTCS 517: ENVIRONMENTAL CINEMA & MEDIA

Grad Seminar – Introductory Concepts in Cultural Studies

Fridays 2:00-5:50 pm
Room SCA 216

Professor Jennifer Lynn Peterson

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Office hours: by appointment

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Course Description

This course explores a set of key theoretical concepts in the contemporary environmental humanities as they apply to cinema and media studies. We will examine how critical theory and media theory have approached topics such as nature, the Anthropocene, indexicality, landscape, colonialism, race, gender, apocalypse, extinction, and futurity, reading texts by writers such as Jean Epstein, André Bazin, Raymond Williams, Carolyn Merchant, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Jennifer Fay, Zoe Todd, T. J. Demos, Rosi Braidotti, Andreas Malm, and many more. Moving image examples will include features, shorts, documentary, and experimental works from across film and media history from the silent era to the present.

Required Books:

- Ashley Dawson, *Extinction: A Radical History* (2016)
 - T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (2017)
 - Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (2018)
 - John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology* (2020)
- *All other texts will be distributed electronically*

Optional Book:

- Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021)

Assignments:

One in-class presentation (on a course reading) – 15%
Three short response papers (posted for discussion) – 30%
Final research paper – 40%
Participation and discussion – 15%

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1 – Cinema & Media and its Relation to the Environment

1/14 Course overview, introductions, sign up for student presentations

Read: Nicholas Mirzoeff, “Visualizing the Anthropocene”
Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World*, Introduction
Anna Tsing, “Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species”

Watch: *Plants of the Underworld* (Mary Field and Percy Smith, 1930), 10 min.
Fantastic Fungi (Louis Schwartzberg, 2019), excerpt
Understory (Colin Arisman, 2021), 40 min.

Week 2 – Nature

1/21 Read: Raymond Williams, “Ideas of Nature”
Stefan Helmreich and Sophia Roosth, “Life Forms: A Keyword Entry”
Rosi Braidotti, “Posthuman Critical Theory”

Watch: Trailer for HBO Max series *A World of Calm* (2020), 2 min.
Nature’s Handiwork (Percy Smith, 1921), 9 min.
The Living Desert (James Algar, 1953), 69 min.

Week 3 – The Anthropocene

1/28 Read: McNeill and Engelke, *The Great Acceleration*, Introduction and Chapter 2
Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”
T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene*

Watch: *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (Jennifer Baichwal et al., 2018), 87 min.

[First response page due by Sunday 1/30 at midnight \(post online\)](#)

Week 4 – Classical Film Theory and the Environment

2/4 Read: Béla Balázs, “Reel Consciousness,” and “Nature and Naturalness”
Jean Epstein, “On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*” and “To A Second Reality, A Second Reason”
Siegfried Kracauer, “The Establishment of Physical Existence” and “Inherent Affinities”
André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”
Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World* chapter 1, “Buster Keaton’s Climate Change”

Watch: *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (Charles Reisner and Buster Keaton, 1928), 71 min.

Week 5 – Film as Index of Nature

2/11 Read: Mary Anne Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity”
James Leo Cahill, *Zoological Surrealism: The Nonhuman Cinema of Jean Painlevé*, Introduction

Watch: Eadweard Muybridge animal locomotion studies (1880s)
The Love Life of the Octopus (Jean Painlevé and Geneviève Hamon, 1965), 14 min.
Chasing Ice (Jeff Orlowski, 2012), 75 min.

Week 6 – Land, Landscape, Colonialism

2/18 Read: W. J. T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape”
Martin Lefebvre, “On Landscape in Narrative Cinema”
Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, Introduction

Watch: Clips from *The Covered Wagon* (James Cruze, 1923), *The Big Trail* (Raoul Walsh, 1930)
“Praxeus,” *Dr. Who*, Series 12, Episode 6 (February 2020), 49 min.

[Second response page due by Sunday 2/20 at midnight \(post online\)](#)

Week 7 – Nature and Race

2/25 Read: Miles A. Powell, *Vanishing America*, Introduction
Zoe Todd, “Decolonizing the Anthropocene”
Katherine McKittrick, “Failure,” from *Dear Science and Other Stories*

Watch: *The Land of Lofty Mountains* (National Park Service, 1930), 10 min.
Attack the Block (Joe Cornish, 2011), 88 min.

Week 8 – “Wilderness”: the Country and the City

3/4 Read: Roderick Frazier Nash, “A Wilderness Condition”
William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness”
Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World* chapter 3, “The Ecologies of Film Noir”

Watch: *High Sierra* (Raoul Walsh, 1941), 100 min.

Week 9 – Marxist Ecology

3/11 Read: John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature*, Introduction and chapters 1, 6 and 8
Jason Moore, “Anthropocene or Capitalocene?”
Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital*, chapter 1: “Towards a History of the Fossil Economy”

Watch: *Manhatta* (Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand, 1921), 10 min.
Water and Power (Pat O’Neill, 1989), 54 min.

[Third response page due by Sunday 3/13 at midnight \(post online\)](#)

3/18 – NO CLASS, SPRING BREAK

Week 10 – Nature and Gender

3/25 Read: Carolyn Merchant, “Nature as Female”
Val Plumwood, “Feminism and Ecofeminism”
Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, Introduction

Watch: *Green Porno: Praying Mantis* (Isabella Rossellini, 2008), 2 min.
Green Porno: Whale (Isabella Rossellini, 2008), 2 min.
Mantrap (Victor Fleming, 1926), 86 min.
Recommended: *Wild* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2014)

Week 11 – NO CLASS

- 4/1 Instructor at SCMS conference in Chicago [if conference is held in person - TBD]
Catch up on your reading and write final paper proposal.

WEEK 12 – Petrocinema

- 4/8 Read: Introduction to *Petrocultures*
Megan Black, *The Global Interior*, Introduction
Hunter Vaughan, “500,000 Kilowatts of Stardust”

Watch: *Wheels of Progress* (USDA, 1927), 10 min.
The Magnificent Ambersons (Orson Welles, 1942), 88 min.

Final paper proposal due – email to instructor by 4/7 at noon.

WEEK 13 – Apocalypse

- 4/15 Read: E. Ann Kaplan, *Climate Trauma*, Introduction and chapter 1
April Anson, “Master Metaphor: Environmental Apocalypse and the Settler States of Emergency”

Watch: Clip from *Deluge* (Felix E. Feist, 1933)
The Road (John Hillcoat, 2009), 111 min.
Recommended: *Greenland* (Ric Roman Waugh, 2020)

WEEK 14 – Extinction and Endangerment

- 4/22 Read: Ashley Dawson, *Extinction: A Radical History*
Jennifer Lynn Peterson, “An Anthropocene Viewing Condition,” forthcoming in *Representations* 157 (Winter 2022)

Watch: *Unsere Afrikareise* (Peter Kubelka, 1966), 13 min.
Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness (Cooper and Schoedsack, 1927), 69 min.

WEEK 15 – Futurity

- 4/29 Discussion of final papers

Read: Donna Haraway, “Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene”
Scott MacDonald, “Toward an Eco-Cinema”

Watch: *Less Lethal Fetishes* (Thirza Cuthand, 2020), 10 min.
Sogobi (James Benning, 2001), 90 min.

FINAL RESEARCH PAPERS: Due Friday May 6



COURSE STRUCTURE AND REQUIREMENTS

This is a discussion-oriented seminar aimed at introducing graduate students from Cinema & Media studies and related disciplines to emerging concepts in the environmental humanities. Through a sustained process of reading, watching, thinking, and writing about media and the environment, students will gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which cinema and media shape the environment and our relationship to it, along with a toolkit of methodological approaches to environmental media. The goal of our in-class meetings is to generate productive, lively, and challenging discussions. As such, you must be sure to attend each class meeting and participate actively in class discussions each week. Participation is part of your course grade; if you miss more than one class, please see me. In the week between each of our course meetings, students will continue their engagement with this material through readings and online discussions.

In class each week, I will provide context for the weekly topic and readings as well as prompts for in-class discussion. There will also be 1-2 student presentations on a course reading in each class session. In addition, we will watch a feature-length film or several shorts in class each week, as time permits.

READINGS AND SCREENINGS

Readings are to be done on your own time before you come to class. Make sure you arrive prepared, having digested the readings and marked them up with notes. For each reading, you should be able to state the main argument as well as any secondary arguments. We will be asking of each reading: How persuasive is this argument? What methodology is the author using? How is this work situated in a larger field of study? What evidence is the author working with to support their claims? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this piece? Screenings will be done in class, unless we start to run out of time, in which case you may have to watch some materials on your own. I will provide you with copies of screening materials when this is the case.

IN-CLASS PRESENTATION

Each student will give an in-class presentation on one of the assigned course readings. This means you will come to class prepared with a short summary of the essay or chapter (its main arguments, methodology, and historical or cultural context), as well as a short list of discussion questions for the class. In leading discussion, you will need to be prepared to answer questions, follow up, and guide the discussion in real-time. You will also submit your presentation to me in written form. You are not required to prepare any slides or media for this presentation, but you may if you wish. (If you show a clip, keep it under 3 minutes maximum.) Your presentation should last about 15-20 minutes. (worth 15% of grade)

THREE SHORT RESPONSE PAPERS

Each student will write a short response paper (2-3 pages, double-spaced) to the previous week's course materials. These will be posted online for student discussion, and this online discussion will form the basis of in-class discussion in the subsequent class meeting. (worth 10% each for a total of 35% of final grade)

FINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Write a final research paper of 20-25 pages. Assignment details to come. (worth 40% of grade)



DEPARTMENT AND UNIVERSITY POLICIES AND PROTOCOLS

COVID Prevention Measures for Classrooms:

I. Students must be compliant with USC's vaccine policy to stay enrolled in classes. We reserve the right to ask for your valid Trojan Check display to participate in this class.

II. Surgical masks are mandatory following the new guidelines and students must remain masked for the duration that they are in this classroom. If you forget to bring your mask, please do not enter the classroom until you have one. If we have extra masks, we may be able to supply you with one. Refusal to comply with the university's mandatory indoor masking policy is a disciplinary matter and will be referred to Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards (SJACS) <https://sjacs.usc.edu/>. Refusal to leave the classroom if you are unmasked constitutes Disruptive Behavior and will lead to intervention by the Department of Public Safety <https://sjacs.usc.edu/disruptive-behavior/>.

III. Students who feel unwell or need to self-isolate should not come to class. A formal medical excuse is not required in such cases this term. We will practice flexibility to the extent possible in the case of absences, in providing absent or remote students with continuity of education by means of shared notes and recordings of classes when possible and available. In the case of absence on assignments or tests, please contact your faculty or TA immediately for make-up tests and additional or alternate readings, screenings and exercises. Screenings for Week One of this CAMS class will be available at <https://scacommunity.usc.edu/>.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct:

Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Class Recordings:

With online course content, it is the student's responsibility to comply with the use and handling of course-related recordings under existing SCampus policies regarding class notes (<https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-c/>). Students are not permitted to create their own class recordings without the instructor's permission. Violations of these policies will be met with the appropriate disciplinary sanction.

Support Systems:

Student Health Counseling Services - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling
Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

Student Health Leave Coordinator – 213-821-4710 Located in the USC Support and Advocacy office, the Health Leave Coordinator processes requests for health leaves of absence and advocates for students taking such leaves when needed. <https://policy.usc.edu/student-health-leave-absence/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call suicidepreventionlifeline.org Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) | Title IX - (213) 740-5086 equity.usc.edu, titleix.usc.edu
Information about how to get help or help a survivor of harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following protected characteristics: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical

disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations.

Bias Assessment Response and Support - (213) 740-2421 studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions for appropriate investigation and response.

USC Office of Student Accessibility Services - (213) 740-0776 osasfrontdesk@usc.edu
Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

USC Support and Advocacy - (213) 821-4710 studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity and Inclusion:

Diversity and Inclusion are foundational to the SCA community. We are committed to fostering a welcoming and supportive environment where students of all identities and backgrounds can flourish. The classroom should be a space for open discussion of ideas and self-expression; however, SCA will not tolerate verbal or written abuse, threats, harassment, intimidation or violence against person or property. If students are concerned about these matters in the classroom setting they are encouraged to contact their SCA Diversity and Inclusion Liaison, <http://cinema.usc.edu/about/diversity.cfm>; e-mail diversity@cinema.usc.edu. You can also report discrimination based on a protected class here <https://equity.usc.edu/harassment-or-discrimination/> *Diversity at USC* - (213) 740-2101. Consult diversity.usc.edu for Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

Disruptive Student Behavior:

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students' ability to learn and an instructor's ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.

Emergency and Safety Contacts:

USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call dps.usc.edu, emergency.usc.edu
USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call dps.usc.edu for non-emergency assistance or information.

–syllabus updated 1.9.2022