



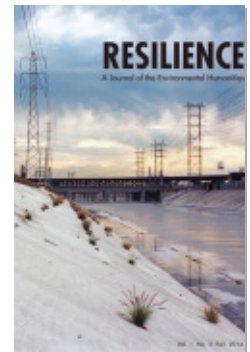
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Green Screen: A Deconstructed Syllabus

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Green Screen

A Deconstructed Syllabus

GREGG MITMAN

Green Screen: Environmental Perspectives through Film is a course that arose out of a number of intersecting interests. Its earliest origins grew from work on my book, *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife*, published in 1999. It began to take more definite form with the launch of the Tales from Planet Earth film festival in 2007, when I had the good fortune of teaching an undergraduate seminar with two environmental filmmakers-in-residence, Judith Helfand and Sarita Siegel. And finally, it came into being when the University of Wisconsin–Madison approved in 2011 a new undergraduate major in environmental studies, quickly creating a demand for foundational courses with humanities content, as the number of enrolled students surpassed three hundred in just two years.

The curation of Tales from Planet Earth—a biennial film festival of the Nelson Institute's Center for Culture, History, and Environment—has been the greatest creative source of inspiration behind Green Screen. Our major goal for the festival was, and is, to trouble the genre of environmental film through programming that challenges audiences to rethink their ideas about what “the environment” is. When Judith Helfand, Sarita Siegel, and I taught the pilot for this course, we were struck with how little conversation was taking place across the worlds of natural history and environmental justice filmmaking. Both claimed the mantle of the environment but represented quite different film genres and different historical traditions. Through the seminar and the festival, we aimed to put different environmental visions—past, present,

and future—in dialogue with one another. When, for example, audiences are thrown into the immersive, disorienting sensory experience of fish, blood, waves, and machines on a commercial fishing boat in Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel's 2012 avant-garde film, *Leviathan*, or are taken back to the moment of industrial modernization of Britain's herring fisheries in John Grierson's 1929 *Drifters*, a history of work and environment comes into view. When the shorts of surrealist filmmaker Jean Painlevé are brought out of the vault, viewers may discover a quite different view of the animal kingdom than they are accustomed to find on PBS or the BBC, one that revels in the magical realism, bizarre antics, and gender bending of undersea life. Digital-media artist Alex Rivera captured the sentiment of our programming well when he thanked Tales in the fall of 2013 “for being the kind of festival that will play both *Chasing Ice* and *Planet of the Apes*.” Over the course of four festivals, we have screened 152 films set in forty-two different countries and on all seven continents, hosted discussions with thirty-six filmmakers, and reached more than 13,500 festivalgoers.

One of the overriding goals of Green Screen is to invite students to ask whose point of view frames the stories told about nature and the environment on screen. Point of view is critical to cinema, and it is critical to the history of environmentalism. By beginning with *March of the Penguins*, a film almost all students have seen, and taking students back in time to the beginnings of nature film, the course initially exposes students to a tradition of American environmentalism grounded in knowing nature through the eye. Situated in late-nineteenth-century ideals of wilderness and deeply shaped by the masculine and racial ideals of a patrician class, the visions of nature on screen that shaped the American conservation movement and endured in the postcolonial era were ones almost always beholden to landscapes of purity and whiteness.

In the second part of the course, we explore other visions by shifting focus to an environmentalism that privileges the body over the eye in knowing nature. Here issues surrounding toxic burdens, the politics of food, and extractive landscapes come to the fore. We return to and delve more deeply into questions of visual sovereignty, first introduced in a week on “The Myth of the Vanishing Race,” to explore how indigenous filmmakers, like Victor Masayvesva Jr., and indigenous media collectives, like Isuma Productions, have seized control of the camera to tell their own stories, ones that eschew the narratives of romantic

primitivism and the ecological Indian and that instead empower communities to give voice to the environmental and social issues directly impacting their lives.

The last section of the course looks to the jeremiad and apocalyptic visions of the future that have long shaped American environmentalism, from the Dust Bowl to *The Population Bomb* to climate change. Through Kimi Takusue's 2011 cli-fi short, *That Which Once Was*, and Alex Rivera's 2008 sci-fi feature film, *Sleep Dealer*, the question of whose future comes into view. In *Sleep Dealer* the privatized water supply in Santa Ana, controlled by a US corporation, propels the future of the North, while draining the lifeblood from the people and the land in the South. Development, Rivera reminds us, is always accompanied by underdevelopment somewhere else.

Through required films screenings and volunteer opportunities, students in Green Screen became directly tied to the Tales from Planet Earth film festival. Students uniformly praised the integration of the class with the festival. The chance to interact with filmmakers from across the globe, the firsthand experience in community engagement, and the breadth of films screened were all highlighted in their evaluations. The most challenging part of the class, by far, has been to help students understand, appreciate, and analyze films as historical and cultural documents. But when they come to see films, and particularly documentaries, not as timeless truths but as points of view situated in time and space; shaped by relations of class, race, and gender; and reflective of the power dynamics inherent in the act of filming, they begin to understand the stakes for people across the globe, in terms of who gets to tell stories on screen about how environmental issues are understood, represented, and seen.

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*Partial Syllabus for Green Screen:
Environmental Perspectives through Film*

COURSE DESCRIPTION

From Teddy Roosevelt's 1909 African safari to the Hollywood blockbuster *King Kong*, from the world of Walt Disney to *The March of the Penguins*, cinema has been a powerful force in shaping public and scientific understanding of nature throughout the twentieth and twenty-

first centuries. How can film shed light on changing environmental ideas and beliefs in American thought, politics, and culture? And how can we come to see and appreciate contested issues of race, class, and gender in nature on screen? This course will explore such questions as we come to understand the role of film in helping to define the contours of past, present, and future environmental visions in the United States, and their impact on the real-world struggles of people and wild-life throughout the world.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Discussion (20%): Each one in class needs to assume the responsibility of an active participant and learner. Success in the class depends largely on the time, energy, and commitment you invest. You will be required to arrive at class having attended the required film screening on Wednesday evening, read the material assigned for the day, and be prepared to engage in a thoughtful and constructive conversation that is respectful of others in the classroom and takes seriously the issues and themes presented in the films and readings. You need to post at least one comment or question on the films screened to the course web page each week.

Film reviews (40%): Choose two films, either screened in class or approved in consultation with us, and write a one thousand-word review essay for the film that discusses how the film has reflected and/or shaped past or present environmental perceptions. Who made the film and why? In what context was the film shown and seen? Who was its intended audience? How was the film received by critics and the public? In what ways did the film reinforce or alter public attitudes toward nature or the environment in significant ways?

Tales from Planet Earth film festival (10%): The Nelson Institute's Center for Culture, History, and Environment will be featuring its fourth biennial festival, Tales from Planet Earth, which will include screenings of thirty-eight features, shorts, and work-in-progress films, along with panel discussions and talks by visiting filmmakers. You are required to attend at least two film screenings and tweet or blog about them. You can gain 3% in extra credit toward your final grade by volunteering for the festival.

Take-home exam (30%): You will have one week to prepare answers of one thousand words each to two of three questions on the course content.

OR

Digital-short option (30%): Working with the DesignLab TA assigned to this course, you will produce a three- to five-minute short video that challenges viewers to see the environment in a new way or offers a mashup of a previous film, challenging us to see its content in a completely different light.

INTRODUCTION

WEEK 1: TELLING STORIES

Mitman, *Reel Nature*, 203–10.

William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 78 (1992): 1347–76.

William Stott, “What Is Documentary,” in *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 5–17.

Brian Dunigan, “Storytelling and Film: Fairy Tales, Myth, and Happy Endings,” *P.O.V.*, no. 18 (2004), http://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_18/section_1/artc1A.html.

ENVIRONMENTAL PASTS: LANDSCAPES OF

PURITY AND WHITENESS

WEEK 2: GREAT WHITE HUNTING

Mitman, *Reel Nature*, 5–58.

William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” *Environmental History* 1 (1996): 7–55.

Helen Bullitt Lowry, “New Adam and Eve among the Gentle Wild Beasts,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 29, 1923, 8.

WEEK 3: THE MYTH OF THE VANISHING RACE

Robert Flaherty, “How I Filmed *Nanook of the North*,” *World’s Work* 44 (1922): 632–40.

John Grierson, “Flaherty” in *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. and comp. Forsyth Hardy (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 139–44

Michelle H. Raheja, “Reading Nanook’s Smile: Visual Sovereignty, Indigenous Revisions of Ethnography and *Atanarujat (The Fast Runner)*,” *American Quarterly* 59 (2007): 1159–85.

Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 99–126.

WEEK 4: ANIMAL WORLDS

Mitman, *Reel Nature*, 59–84.

Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman, introduction to *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 1–14.

Jacob von Uexküll, "A Stroll through the Worlds of Animals and Men," in *Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept*, trans. and ed. Claire H. Schiller (New York: International Universities Press, 1957), 5–13.

Jean Painlevé, "Feet in the Water," in *Science Is Fiction: The Films of Jean Painlevé*, ed. Andy Masaki Bellows and Marina McDougall (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 130–39.

WEEK 5: NEW DEAL VISIONS

Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 33–86.

Mitman, *Reel Nature*, 85–108.

Paul Sears, *Deserts on the March* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1935), 157–84.

WEEK 6: DISNEY'S NATURE

Mitman, *Reel Nature*, 109–31.

Matt Cartmill, *A View to a Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature through History*, 161–88.

Walt Disney, "What I've Learned from the Animals," *American Magazine* 155 (February 1953): 23, 106–9.

"Walt Disney Receives Audubon Medal," *Audubon Magazine* 58 (1956): 25, 45.

ENVIRONMENTAL PRESENTS: DIVERSIFYING

ISSUES AND AUDIENCES

WEEK 7: THE ECOLOGICAL INDIAN

Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 15–28, 211–29.

Fatimah Tobing Rony, "Victor Masayesva, Jr., and the Politics of *Imagining Indians*," *Film Quarterly* 48 (1994–1995): 20–33.

Finis Dunaway, "Gas Masks, Pogo, and the Ecological Indian: Earth Day and the Visual Politics of American Environmentalism," *American Quarterly* 60 (2008): 67–99.

WEEK 8: THE ENDURING LEGACIES OF COLONIAL CONSERVATION

Mitman, *Reel Nature*, 180–202.

Jonathan Adams and Thomas McShane, *The Myth of Wild Africa: Conservation without Illusion*, 184–206.

Ramachandra Guha, "The Authoritarian Biologist and the Arrogance of Anti-Humanism: Wildlife Conservation in the Third World," *The Ecologist* 27 (1997): 14–20.

WEEK 9: CELEBRITY ANIMALS

Mitman, *Reel Nature*, 157–79.

WEEK 10: TOXIC BURDENS

Barbara Allen, “Telling Stories about the Environment,” in *Uneasy Alchemy: Citizens and Experts in Louisiana’s Chemical Corridor Disputes* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 19–49.

Giovanna Di Chiro, “Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice,” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 298–320.

Judith Helfand, interview Adina Back and Pennee Bender, “Connecting the Dots: Workers, Families, and Toxic Exposure, Past and Present,” *Radical History Review* 80 (2001): 121–33.

WEEK 11: EXTRACTIVE LANDSCAPES

Valerie Kuletz, “Tragedy at the Center of the Universe,” in *Learning to Glow: A Nuclear Reader*, ed. John Bradley (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), 141–57.

Silas House and Jason Howard, *Something’s Rising: Appalachians Fighting Mountaintop Removal* (University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 1–22.

Bill McKibben, “Energizing America,” *Sierra Magazine*, January/February 2007.

WEEK 12: THE POLITICS OF FOOD

Michael Pollan, “When a Crop Becomes King,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/19/opinion/when-a-crop-becomes-king.html>.

Maya Joseph and Marion Nestle, “Food and Politics in the Modern Age, 1920–2012,” in *A Cultural History of Food*, ed. Amy Bentley, vol. 6, *In the Modern Age* (Oxford: Berg, 2012), 87–110.

Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 169–90.

Julie Guthman, *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 140–62.

ENVIRONMENTAL FUTURES

WEEK 13: THE END TIMES OF ECOLOGY

Jacob Darwin Hamblin, “The Domsday Men,” in *Arming Mother Nature: The Birth of Catastrophic Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 151–78.

Paul Sabin, *The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and Our Gamble over Earth’s Future* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 1–9, 217–27.

Paul Erhlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), 15–67.

WEEK 14: FACING A WARMING PLANET

Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 263–80.

Mike Davis, “Living on the Ice Shelf: Humanity’s Meltdown,” *TomDispatch.com*, June 26, 2008, <http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/174949>.

WEEK 15: WHOSE FUTURE?

Giovanna Di Chiro, “Beyond Ecoliberal ‘Common Futures’: Environmental Justice, Toxic Touring, and a Transcommunal Politics of Place,” in *Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference*, ed. by Donald S. Moore, Jake Kosek, and Anand Pandian (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 204–32.

Sharada Balachandran Orihuela and Andrew Carl Hageman, “The Virtual Realities of US/Mexico Border Ecologies in *Maquilapolis* and *Sleep Dealer*,” *Environmental Communication* 5 (2011): 166–86.

Screenings

1. *March of the Penguins* (2005, 80 min.)
2. *Simba: King of the Beasts* (1928, 87 min.)
3. *Nanook of the North* (1922, 79 min.)
4. *The Sea Horse* (1934, 15 min.); *The Love Life of the Octopus* (1965, 13 min.); *The Private Life of the Gannet* (1934, 10 min.); *Microcosmos* (1996, 80 min.)
5. *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936, 25 min.); *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940, 129 min.)
6. *Nature’s Half-Acre* (1951, 33 min.); *Bambi* (1942, 70 min.)
7. PSA of Ecological Indian (1971); *Imagining Indians* (1992, 60 min.)
8. *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988, 122 min.)
9. Tales from Planet Earth (festival)
10. *Blue Vinyl* (2002, 98 min.)
11. *Deep Down* (2010, 57 min.); *The Return of Navjao Boy* (2000, 52 min.)
12. *King Corn* (2007, 88 min.)

13. *Soylent Green* (1973, 70 min.); *Sun Come Up* (2011, 38 min.); *That Which Once Was* (2011, 21 min.)
14. *Sleep Dealer* (2008, 90 min.)

Optional Digital-Short Assignment: Working with the DesignLab TA for this course, you will produce a three- to five-minute short video that challenges viewers to see the environment in a new way or offers a mashup of a previous film, challenging us to see its content in a completely different light.

Those interested in the digital-short option must submit a one-page (maximum) request, answering the question why producing a short video would enhance your academic goals and enrich your experience in this course. Please also indicate how you would like to use this exercise to broaden your perspective on what constitutes an environmental issue or problem.

In addition, include the name of someone, if anyone, whom you would like to work with on this project. Your partner will otherwise be assigned randomly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gregg Mitman is the Vilas Research and William Coleman Professor of History of Science, Medical History, and Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. His teaching and writing interests span the history of ecology, nature, and health in the United States and the world and are informed by a commitment and hope to build a more equitable and just environment. Reaching across the fields of environmental history, the history of science and medicine, and the visual culture of science, his research seeks to understand the ways in which political economy, cultural values and beliefs, and scientific knowledge intersect in shaping the interactions between people and environments over time. He is the founding and current director of the Nelson Institute's Center for Culture, History, and Environment and is also curator of Madison's popular environmental film festival, *Tales from Planet Earth*. He is currently at work on a book that explores the forgotten paths of empire that bound the West African republic of Liberia to the United States, and on a film and public history website that repurposes the photographs and films of a 1926 Harvard scientific expedition, in the service of history and memory in postwar Liberia.