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Media and the Environment Syllabus Guide

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Media and the Environment Syllabus Guide

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This course introduces students to the many relationships between media and the environment, including not only the representation of nature in traditional media such as film and television but also the material entanglements of media technologies with surrounding built and natural environments.

The syllabus is designed to encourage comparative thinking across four axes: history, media technology, modes of environmentalism, and disciplinary approach. After beginning with debates about climate change that have dominated environmentalism over the last decade, the course moves back through history to the origins of landscape photography in nineteenth century. It then proceeds chronologically to track the development of environmental media, introducing students to the early cinematic representations of nature, the expansion of the environmental movement with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the emergence of apocalyptic predictions about overpopulation in the 1970s, and the toxic discourse and environmental justice actions of the 1980s. In each of these cases, I locate historical and contemporary material in conversation. During week 3 I pair readings on traditional landscape photography with Edward Burtynsky's recent *Manufactured Landscapes*. During week 12 I connect colonial-era biopiracy with more recent circulations of biomatter. In teaching this class, I have found that such transhistorical connections help students relate the history of environmental media to their analysis of contemporary forms.

As the course moves from past to present, it intersects a broad spec-

trum of environmental issues and movements. Each week we focus on a different ecological problem, which helps students to see how the framing of environmental concerns shifts both over time and across geographic contexts. Topics include industrialization, species extinction, the production of pesticides and petrochemicals, oil drilling and fracking, overpopulation, toxicity, consumerism and waste, overfishing, biopiracy and food systems, deforestation, and interspecies relationships.

In addition, the course covers a range of media forms. I have assigned texts that help generate discussion about the specificity of different modes of communication, including print (Murphy, Buell, Nixon), photography (Lewis, Sontag, Bright), cinema (Ivakhiv, MacDonald, Hughes), television (Bousé, Parks), digital media (Wolfe, Gabrys, Chang, Houser), and the arts (Jevbratt). Students are also asked to experiment with media production using these technologies. In previous courses, they have developed a wide range of projects: tactical media interventions, advocacy campaigns, radio shows, music videos, documentaries, animated films, web series, digital maps, installation art, and plans for environmental exhibits and museums.

Lastly, the syllabus includes texts oriented to the fields of ecocriticism (Buell, Chang, Yaeger, Nixon), ecocinema studies (Ivakhiv, Bousé, MacDonald), environmental communication (Cammaer, Lakoff, Wolfe), and art history (Bright). Understanding these disciplinary perspectives assists students in their critical assessment of arguments about environmental media and communication. We pay particular attention to scholars' research methodologies, the assumptions they make about knowledge production, and the texts and contexts they consider.

Embedded in this syllabus is a thesis that argues, despite the longstanding mediation of the environment, that new forms of media are required to catalyze environmental change. I have found that the emphasis on comparative thinking has helped students to understand the critical and contextual approaches needed to innovate in environmental media production: to conceptualize it as taking place within a specific historical moment, to position it in relation to particular audiences and publics, and to account for the specificities of existing environments and technologies. By foregrounding this perspective throughout the course and pairing it with project-based work, the course attempts to reorient students as ethical media producers, rather than simply consumers of media.

Media and the Environment

This interdisciplinary course will introduce you to the ways that environments, both natural and human, have been shaped by media representations and technologies. It will cover a variety of media forms, including newspapers, photography, literature, film, television, the internet, and video games, and identify their unique contributions to the representation and engagement of environmental issues. The course will look at the specific roles of media both in shaping modern environmental advocacy movements and in setting broader conditions for the perception of the environment.

We will assess environmental media from diverse disciplinary perspectives—including communication, film and media studies, and English—which will help you to identify and utilize a range of methodologies and critical frameworks. The course will also introduce you to the development of environmental media in different historical periods, extending from the tradition of landscape photography in the late nineteenth century to video art, animation, and video games, and to the interactive affordances and “salvage aesthetics” that accompany them. We’ll also look specifically at how genres of environmental discourse have evolved during the late twentieth century, including apocalypse and disaster narratives, ecocomedies, toxic discourse, environmental melodrama, and the documentary image-event. While the course will survey a range of different media forms, it will retain a focus on cinema, television, and digital media. During the semester, we will screen a number of films, including *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *The Island President* (2011), *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006), *Grizzly Man* (2005), *Oil for Aladdin’s Lamp* (1949), *Gasland* (2010), *Soylent Green* (1973), *The Gleaners and I* (2000), *Safe* (1995), *The Cove* (2009), and *The Lorax* (1972).

In this class, we will also experiment with media production, using diverse platforms and technologies. Assignments will require that you draw on the histories and concepts from course readings in order to develop original media projects. You will be challenged not simply to reproduce existing models of environmental communication but to innovate in the representation of the environment and to connect to emerging cultural formations.

Course Schedule

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION TO MEDIA AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Screening: *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006)

WEEK 2: ECOCENTRIC, ANTHROPOCENTRIC, AND MEDIACENTRIC APPROACHES

Case study: Climate change

Reading:

Arne Naess and George Sessions, "Basic Principles of Deep Ecology," *Ecophilosophy* 4 (May 1984): 3–7.

Mark Maslin, "A Brief History of the Global Warming Debate," in *Global Warming: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23–35.

Birgit Schneider and Thomas Nocke, introduction to *Image Politics of Climate Change: Visualizations, Imaginations, Documentations* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014), 9–18.

Carol Farbotko, "Wishful Sinking: Disappearing Islands, Climate Refugees and Cosmopolitan Experimentation," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 51, no. 1 (April 2010): 47–60.

Jon Lewis, "Putting a Face to Climate Change—Kiribati—Portraits from the Edge," *Visual Communication* 9, no. 2 (2010): 231–36.

Screening: *The Island President* (2011)

WEEK 3: PHOTOGRAPHY, LANDSCAPE, INDUSTRIALIZATION

Case study: Industrialization

Reading:

Susan Sontag, "In Plato's Cave," in *On Photography* (New York: Dell, 1977), 1–19.

W. J. T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed., ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5–34.

Deborah Bright, "The Machine in the Garden Revisited: American Environmentalism and Photographic Aesthetics," *Art Journal* 51, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 60–71.

Gerda Cammaer, "Edward Burtynsky's Manufactured Landscapes: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Creating Moving Still Images and Stilling Moving Images of Ecological Disasters," *Environmental Communication* 3, no. 1 (2009): 121–30.

Screening: *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006)

WEEK 4: CINEMA, NATURE, WILDLIFE

Case study: Endangered species

Reading:

Adrian Ivakhiv, "Green Film Criticism and Its Futures," *Foreign Literature Studies* 29, no. 1 (2007): 1–28.

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

Derek Bousé, "The Problem of Images," in *Wildlife Films* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 1347–76.

Scott MacDonald, "Toward an Eco-Cinema," *ISLE* 11, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 107–32.

Screening: *Grizzly Man* (2005)

WEEK 5: NEWS, FRAMING, AND ENVIRONMENTAL COVERAGE

Case study: Pesticides and petrochemicals

Reading:

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), selections.

Priscilla Coit Murphy, "Media: 'One Formidable Indictment,'" in *What a Book Can Do: The Publication and Reception of Silent Spring* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 119–58.

George Lakoff, "Why It Matters How We Frame the Environment," *Environmental Communication* 4, no. 1 (2010): 70–81.

Lawrence Buell, "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends," *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2011): 87–115.

Screening: *Oil for Aladdin's Lamp* (1949), *Gasland* (2010)

WEEK 7: ENVIRONMENTAL BLOCKBUSTERS AND APOCALYPTIC DISCOURSE

Case study: Overpopulation

Reading:

Paul R. Ehrlich, "The Ends of the Road," in *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), 45–77.

M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline S. Palmer, "Millennial Ecology: The Apocalyptic Narrative from Silent Spring to Global Warming," in *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 21–45.

Ursula Heise, "Among the Everywheres: Global Crowds and the Networked Planet," in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 68–90.

Guy Debord, "The Culmination of Separation," in *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. K. Knabb (Detroit: Black and Red, 1977), 6–17.

Screening: *Soylent Green* (1973)

WEEKS 8–9: TOXICITY AND MELODRAMA

Case study: Toxicity

Reading:

Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking, 1985).

Ulrich Beck, “The Politics of Knowledge in the Risk Society,” in *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: SAGE, 1992), 51–84.

Stacy Alaimo, “Deviant Agents: The Science, Culture, and Politics of Multiple Chemical Sensitivity,” in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 113–40.

Lawrence Buell, “Toxic Discourse,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Spring 1998): 639–65.

Steven Schwarze, “Environmental Melodrama,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92, no. 3 (2006): 239–61.

Screening: *Safe* (1995)

WEEK 10: MEDIA ECOLOGIES, RECYCLING, AND SALVAGE AESTHETICS

Case study: Consumerism and waste

Reading:

Ursula K. Heise, “Unnatural Ecologies: The Metaphor of the Environment in Media Theory,” *Configurations* 10 (2002): 149–68.

Jennifer Gabrys, introduction to *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

Lisa Parks, “Falling Apart: Electronics Salvaging and the Global Media Economy,” in *Residual Media*, ed. Charles R. Acland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 32–47.

Patricia Yaeger, “Trash as Archive: Trash as Enlightenment,” in *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, ed. Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 103–16.

Screening: *The Gleaners and I* (2000)

WEEK 11: GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM AND THE DOCUMENTARY IMAGE-EVENT

Case study: Overfishing

Reading:

Rob Nixon, introduction to *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

Kevin Michael DeLuca, “Making Waves,” in *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 1–22.

Helen Hughes, “Scrutiny and Documentary: Hubert Sauper’s *Darwin’s Nightmare*,” *Screen* 53, no. 3 (Autumn 2012): 246–65.

Screening: *The Cove* (2009) and selections from *Darwin's Nightmare* (2003)

WEEK 12: VIRALITY, ECO-COMEDY, AND (FOOD) SYSTEMS

Case study: Biopiracy and food systems

Reading:

Richard Grove, introduction to *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Vandana Shiva, *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge* (Boston: South End Press, 1997), selections.

Dylan Wolfe, "The Video Rhizome: Taking Technology Seriously in *The Meatrix*," *Environmental Communication* 3, no. 3 (2009): 317–34.

Alison Bodkin, "Eco-Comedy Performance: An Alchemy of Environmentalism and Humor," in *Performance on Behalf of the Environment*, ed. Richard D. Besel and Jnan A. Blau (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2014), 51–72.

Screening: *The Meatrix* (2003) and "Whale Whores," *South Park* (2009)

WEEK 13: ARTIFICIAL ECOLOGIES: ANIMATION, GAMES, AND DATA VISUALIZATION

Case study: Deforestation

Reading:

Alenda Y. Chang, "Games as Environmental Texts," *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2011): 56–84.

Nicole Starosielski, "Movements that are Drawn: A History of Environmental Animation from *The Lorax* to *FernGully* to *Avatar*," *International Communication Gazette* 73, nos. 1–2 (2011): 145–63.

Sean Cubitt, "Everyone Knows This Is Nowhere: Data Visualization and Ecocriticism," in *Ecocinema: Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt (New York: Routledge, 2012), 279–96.

Heather Houser, "The Aesthetics of Environmental Visualizations: More than Information Ecstasy?" *Public Culture* 26, no. 2 (2014): 319–37.

Screening: *The Lorax* (1972)

Play: *Flower* (2009), *Shelter* (2012), and *Forest Defenders* (2014)

View: "The Timber Trade" and "Wind Map"

WEEK 14: PROGRAMS AND PROTOCOL:
COLLABORATIONS WITH THE NONHUMAN

Case Study: Interspecies relationships

Reading:

Lisa Jevbratt, "Inter-species Collaboration." http://jevbratt.com/writing/jevbratt_interspecies_collaboration.pdf.

Anna Tsing, "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as a Companion Species." <http://tsingmushrooms.blogspot.com/>.

Jake Kosek, "Ecologies of Empire: On the New Uses of the Honeybee," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2010): 650–78.

Jussi Parikka, "Politics of Swarms: Translations between Entomology and Biopolitics," *Parallax* 14, no. 3 (2008): 112–24.

Interact: *Feral Robotic Dogs* (2003), *Cockroach Controlled Mobile Robot* (2006), *Bear 71* (2012), *ZooMorph* (2013), and *#saltNsea* (2014)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicole Starosielski is an assistant professor in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University. Her research focuses on the global distribution of digital media and on the relationships between technology, society, and the aquatic environment. Her first book project, *The Undersea Network* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2015), charts the cultural and environmental dimensions of transoceanic cable systems, beginning with the telegraph cables of the first global communications network and extending to the fiber-optic infrastructure supporting international Internet traffic.