

Course Title: “Environment in Thought and Image: Fantasies of Catastrophe in Literature and Film”

Date and Time: Thursdays, 1.00 to 3.50: Humanities 1008

Professor: E. Ann Kaplan, Distinguished Professor of English and Cultural Analysis and Theory

Office: 1013 Humanities, Ground Floor, Humanities Building

Office Hours: By Appointment (call 632-9957 or 9983)

We’re not going to get there without the humanities. We need the ethical, historical and creative perspectives on the human role in the anthropocene.” Susanne Moser (informal comments at conference 2011)

“Climate change needs to become a first-tier category of cultural analysis, in the manner of race, gender, class and sexual orientation...counterinsurgency has repeatedly displaced climate change...We need an anthropocene visuality derived from the concept that human action since 1750 has produced a new geological era which Paul Crutzen first called the Anthropocene.” Nick Mirzoeff (at an HISB talk).

“With cities as “dominant landscapes, how are we to redesign cities considered as ‘closed’ ecosystems through new architectural, heritage and urban models to achieve sustainability? How are we to accelerate the social change necessary to move toward sustainable, equitable societies and how do we guarantee that such change fosters global justice?” (Questions posed by Poul Holm based on research)

Syllabus

This course studies changing conceptions of geographical, political and social environments as a result of decades long human interventions in planet Earth’s various systems. We consider these changes through both documentary and futurist dystopian fantasy in literature and film. Filmmakers and novelists in the post 9/11 era increasingly create fictional worlds marking both the end of utopian dreams of a perfectible social world and (relatedly) the destructive geological force that humans now occupy on planet Earth and that represents entry into the “Anthropocene” era. We will consider (and try to account for) the oscillating dystopian/utopian binary in works we study. While analyzing the deliberate creation of a culture of fear by those in power, we will also study the real dangers that face humans and the planet.

Combining theory with textual analysis, the course includes both commercial futurist films fantasizing catastrophe, and documentaries about ongoing environmental crises endangering humanity. Several interdisciplinary theories frame the project—Memory Studies, Affect Theory, Psychoanalysis, Trauma Studies, Cognitive Psychology. Related topics include: Environmental Citizenship and Justice;

Slow Environmental Violence and Behavioral Change; Gender, Race and the Environment.

We will ask the following questions: Will the meaning of the “human” change as a result of our historical entry into the Anthropocene Era? Does what we mean by “humanism” or “human rights,” or social justice, change? How can we address the challenges we face in a culture of media misinformation, omissions and distraction? Can humanists contribute by imagining a future that will be very different from what we have known?

Films and novels include: *Children of Men*; *The Handmaid’s Tale*; *Blindness*; *The Road*. **Documentaries:** *Manufactured Landscapes*; *Into Eternity*; *Living Downstream*. **Theorists** include many of the following: Rob Nixon, Leerom Medavoi, Susanne Moser; Elizabeth Kolbert, Slavoj Zizek, Fredric Jameson, Andrew Dobson, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ramachandra Ghua, Giorgio Agamben, Freud, Dominick LaCapra, Elaine Scarry, Brian Massumi.

This course is one of three linked courses in HISB’s Fall 2013 pedagogical initiative funded by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. The course will work in tandem with HISB’s Fall Distinguished Lecturer Series on the topic “Humanities For the Environment: Politics, Science and Ecologies of Value.” Please see HISB’s website www.sunysb.edu/humanities for details. Students will benefit from distinguished scholars talking informally in select class sessions, and from Public Lectures that follow. As far as possible, students should attend these lectures, some of which will be held on Wednesdays.

Preliminary Syllabus

***Please note that All Readings listed by each week can be found in the Documents Folder under “Readings.” All visual materials under “AV Materials.”**

Week 1: 8/29 Introduction

Ideology, Rhetoric, Communicating Science: Science Fiction versus Documentary

Film: *Surviving Progress*

Weeks 2: 9/05 **Climate Trauma Future-Tense**

Film: Jeff Nichols’ *Take Shelter* (2011)

Readings: Chakrabarty “The Climate of History” (Blackboard)

Bill McKibben, ed. *Global Warming* (Required Text, selections)

E. Ann Kaplan, “Trauma Studies Moving Forward” (Blackboard)

Week 3: 9/12: **Pre-Traumatic Catastrophe Cinema:**

Films: *Children of Men* (2006); McCarthy *The Road* (selections from the novel, 2006)

Readings: Heather Latimer, “Bio-Reproductive Futurism: Bare Life and the Pregnant Refugee in Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men*.” (BB)

Kaplan, “Trauma Future-Tense” (reference to *Children of Men*) (BB)

Recommended: Jane Elliott, "Suffering Agency"
David Harvey "Introduction" on "Neoliberalism"

Week 4: 9/19 **Science Discourse/Documentary Film: Radioactivity**

Film: Madsen, *Into Eternity* (Class viewing Wed Sept 13, 1.00pm HISB)
Blind (Japanese film re radiation: Find on YouTube)

Nicholas Fisher Lecture

Readings: Fisher, "Pacific Rim Bluefin Tuna Transport Fukushima-derived radionuclides from Japan to California (Blackboard)

Fisher, "Evaluation of Radiation Doses and Associated Risk from Fukushima Nuclear Accident" (Blackboard)

Wikipedia Entry on "Radioactive Decay" (scroll to section on Actinides in the Environment)

Recommended: Kathryn Yusoff, "Excess, Catastrophe, and Climate Change" (Blackboard)

Week 5: 9/26 **Trauma Theory**

Readings: Ruth Leys "Introduction," (Posted in BB Discussion Forum)

Cathy Caruth (selection) (Posted in BB Discussion Forum)

Kaplan "Why Trauma Now?" (BB readings)

Matti Rahu, "Health Effects of the Chernobyl Accident..."

Recommended: Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss...." (BB)

Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism" (BB)

In class visitor: Evelyn Bromet, SBU Epidemiologist and Consultant on psychological impact of Fukushima and Chernobyl

Wednesday, October 2: LECTURE: David Chameides, "Chasing Sustainability"

Students: Please attend if you can: HISB 1008, 4.00pm

Week 6: 10/02 **Overconsumption and the planet**

Films: Jennifer Baichwal, *Manufactured Landscapes*

Readings: Ramachandra Guha, *How Much do we Consume?* (Blackboard)

Chameides' blog **Jonathan to Present on Guha and Chameides**

Mark Hertsgaard, "Is Your Stomach Too Full?" (McKibben, 135-163)

Recommended: Slavoj Zizek, "Apocalypse at the Gates" (Blackboard)

Week 7: 10/10 **Affects in the Zone of Social Collapse**

Readings: José Saramago's *Blindness* (Required Text) **Greg to Present (?)**

Fernando Meirelles' film adaptation, *Blindness* (DVD On Course Reserve)

Margaret Atwood, "Dire Cartographies" (Blackboard)

Week 8: 10/17 **Eco-Criticism Critiques/Infrastructure**

In Class Visitors: Leerom Medovoi and Michael Rubenstein: Followed by lecture, 4.30pm Humanities 1008

Readings: Leerom Medovoi, "The Biopolitical Unconscious: Toward an Eco-Marxist Literary Theory" and "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Ecology"

(Both on Blackboard but need to scroll down in “Readings”)
Michael Rubenstein, “Electrification, or Dramatizing Power” (Blackboard)
And “Light Reading” (BB)

Week 9: 10/24 Colonialism and the Environment/Environmentalism for the Poor

Readings: Rob Nixon, “Introduction” to *Slow Violence* (Blackboard) **Sophie and Nicole to Present**
Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* **Joseph to Present**

LECTURE WED OCT 30: Ramachandra Guha, 4.00pm HUM 1006
Students: Please attend if you can

Week 10: 10/31 Colonialism and Global Environmentalism Part II

In Class Visit with Guha:

Reading: *Environmentalism: A Global History* (Required text) **Faye to Present**

Week 11: 11/07 **Gender and Pollution**

Film: *Living Downstream*;

1.00 to 2.30: Student Reports on Research Papers

In class Visitors: Sandra Steingraber, Guest Lecturer; Heidi Hutner, Director,
SBU Sustainability Program

Readings: Sandra Steingraber (selections to come)

Felicity Callard and Constantina Papoulias, “Affect and Embodiment”
(Blackboard) **Joseph to present**

Please see other materials related to Affect Theory Joseph posted on BB

Recommended: Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature* (Blackboard)

Week 12: 11/14 **Communicating Science 1: Getting Real**

In Class Visitor: Susanne Moser

Readings: Moser, “More Bad News: The Risk of Neglecting Emotional Responses
To Climate Change Information” (Blackboard)

Moser, “Getting Real about it: Meeting the Psychological and Social Demands
Of a World in Distress” (Blackboard)

Ross Gelbspan, “The Battle for Control of Reality” (McKibben, 106-125) plus
Naomi Klein, “Climate Rage,” 229-250.

Recommended: Brian Massumi, “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact”
(Blackboard)

Week 13: 11/21 **Communicating Science II:**

1.00 to 2.30: Student Reports on Research Papers

In Class Visitor: Elizabeth Kolbert

Seminar in School of Journalism: Howie Schneider and Liz Bass)

Readings: Kolbert, Essays from *Ends of the Earth* and *Field Notes* (BB)

Kolbert, “Lines in the Sand,” *New Yorker* (May 27, 2013:23-24)

Kolbert, "The Darkening Sear" (McKibben, 373-398)

Week 14: VACATION 11/28 THANKSGIVING

Week 14: 12/05 Student Research Projects