

Film, Literature, and Theory for the Anthropocene: Archives and End Times

Jennifer Fay

ENGL 8442.01: Fall Semester 2019

Mondays 3:10- 6:00 p.m. Buttrick 020

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Course Description

What is the place of the Earth in media and critical theory? How have visual and time-based media shaped, literally, the planet we call home not only by providing representations of our world and imitations of life, but also by leaving behind their own trace deposits? How do literary and media archives enable us to understand our entanglements with non-human entities and geophysical forces, even as they posit an image and a future world without us? And what does it mean to watch a film or read fiction with a view to not just “the world” but the planet?

This seminar is a primer in environmental humanities, one of the most critically vibrant and professionally expanding interdisciplinary fields. We will focus on a range of texts and reading practices in order to grapple with challenges of the Anthropocene (including challenges to the very term “the Anthropocene”) and its attendant phenomena. It situates 20th and 21st century literature, film, and theory within a longer intellectual history of technology, “nature,” and what were once presumed to be features of human exceptionalism. We will also linger over catastrophism (the Malthusian specter of over-population, species extinction, nuclear war, and apocalyptic thinking, capitalism) as a projection of end times and a forecast of a new beginning on a different kind of planet.

Topics include:

- Climate change, history, and post-colonial studies;
- Frankfurt school theories of film, photography, and anti-humanist media;
- Critiques of Enlightenment reason and its turn to natural history;
- Richard Wright’s flood fiction and the “insurgent geographies” of the “Black Anthropocene”;
- Cinema of the mega-dam and the ecology of the poor;
- Queer environmentalism;
- Extinction narratives;
- Mutation, mutants, and animal being;
- Nuclearism and ritual in sacrificial zones.

Required Texts

Jeremy Davies, *Birth of the Anthropocene*. U of California Press, 2016.

Available online via VU library

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*. Penguin, 1977—reprint 2006.

Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*. Semiotexts, 2009. (a PDF is posted on Brightspace).

Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*. Princeton, 2002.

Jason O. Moore, *Capitalism and the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. Verso, 2015.

Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. U of Minnesota Press, 2018

Essays and excerpts will be posted on Brightspace.

Assignments:

Discussion Prompts: At least *three* times across the semester, you are asked to post a substantial (minimum 500-word) response to the texts for the week in *advance* of our Monday discussion, Sunday by 12:00 a.m. (midnight). I circulate a sign-up sheet. Part of your response should be a summary of the reading/s. The balance may focus on one particular detail of an argument or narrative turn, or work out some of the ways texts may be connected, or query a problem or underlying assumption in a text or texts (when there are multiple readings). Ideally, this reflection will be formulated as a substantial question or set of questions followed by your own tentative answer. You might also briefly explain how you arrived at this question. These writings will be the prompts for our in-class discussions and may inspire ideas for your seminar paper. These will also give me an opportunity to respond to your ideas and writing. You are encouraged to use the Brightspace discussion board more than twice! But I will circulate a sign-up sheet to ensure that everyone makes use of it *at least* twice.

Seminar Paper: You have three options. All seminar papers should engage texts from this class. You are welcome, indeed encouraged, to introduce other materials, and you may read the seminar materials within the context of your interests and areas of specialization.

1. Option one: A 20-25 page seminar paper due Monday December 9, 12:00 (midnight)
2. Option two: Two 10-15 page papers. The first due Friday October 11 at 12:00 a.m. (midnight), the second due Monday Dec. 9 at 12:00 a.m. (midnight).
3. Option Three: One 10-15 page paper due October 11, which you then expand into a longer seminar paper due on Monday, Dec. 9 by 12:00 a.m. (midnight).

Robust class participation: I take class participation seriously as measure of your preparation for class and engagement with the material. Come to every class having done the reading and screening (when applicable). Be ready to ask questions, make claims, and connections.

Reading schedule (Subject to some tinkering...)

Week 1 (Aug. 26th): Introduction to an Epoch

Davies, *Birth of the Anthropocene*

Chakrabarty "The Climate of History: Four Theses"

Steffen, et al. "The Anthropocene."

Week 2 (Sept. 2): Nuclear Beginnings, Modern Literature, and Anthropocene Archives

Derrida "No Apocalypse, Not Now," *Diacritics*

Saint-Amour, "Bombing and the Symptom" *Diacritics*

Steffen, et al, "The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration." *Anthropocene Review*

Zalasiewicz, et al. "When Did the Anthropocene Begin?" *Quaternary International*

Waters, et al. "How to Date the Natural Archives of the Anthropocene?" *Geology Today*

Week 3 (Sept. 9): Trinity and the Sacrificial Zone

Silko, *Ceremony*

Gusterson, "Nuclear Weapons Testing as Scientific Ritual."

Screening: (atomic test films): Trinity, Operation Cue, Plowshare.

Recommended: Piper, "Police Zones"

Week 4 (Sept. 16): Environmental Design/ Media Theory

Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*

Siegfried Kracauer: "Calico World," "Photography"

Screening: *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (Keaton, 1928)

Week 5 (Sept. 23): Nature and Enlightenment

Adorno and Horkheimer, from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* "The Concept of Enlightenment"; "Excurses
I: Odysseus of Myth and Enlightenment"

Bruno Latour, "Agency in the Anthropocene"

Week 6 (Sept. 30): Natural History and the Problem of Evil (from Lisbon to Auschwitz)

Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*

Week 7 (Oct. 7). Capitalism and Cheap Nature

Jason O. Moore, *Capitalism and the Web of Life*.

Week 8 (Oct 14): Refugees

Rob Nixon, "Introduction"; "Unimagined Communities: Megadam, Monumental Modernity, and
Developmental Refugees" from *Slow Violence: Ecology of the Poor*

McAdams, "Climate Change Displacement and International Law." [Report from the United
Nations High Commissioner for Refugees]

Fay, "Introduction" and "Still Life" from *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene*

Screening: *Still Life* (Jia, 2006); *Story of the Hoover Dam* (1955)

Week 9 (Oct. 21): Anthropocene Forms

Ghosh, excerpts from *The Great Derangement*

Morton, excerpts from *Hyperobjects*

Kohn, excerpts from *How Forests Think*

Week 10 (Oct. 28): Flood Stories

Susan Scott Parrish, "Introduction," "Modern Overflow" + "Modernism within a Second Nature"
from *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History*

Walter Benjamin "Great Mississippi Flood." "The Lisbon Earthquake"

Richard Wright "Down by the Riverside" and "The Man Who Saw The Flood."

Week 11(Nov. 4): Insurgent Geologies

Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*

Ahuja, "Race, Human Security, and the Climate Refugee"

Week 12 (Nov. 11): Animals in a Second Nature

Van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*

Screening: *Zoo* (Wiseman, 1993)

Week 13 (Nov. 18): Queer Anthropocene

Neel Ahuja, "Intimate Atmosphere: Queer Theory in a Time of Extinctions"

Whitney A. Bauman, "Queer Values for a Queer Climate:"

Week 14: Thanksgiving:

Week 15 (Dec. 2). Week for writing!