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

Jennifer Fay
Vanderbilt Department of English
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j.fay@vanderbilt.edu

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 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
Available online via VU library
Peter Sloterdijk, Terror from the Air. Semiotexts, 2009. (a PDF is posted on Brightspace).
Thom Van Dooren Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction. Columbia UP, 2014
Reading schedule

Week 1 (Aug. 26th): Introduction to an Epoch
Davies, Birth of the Anthropocene

Week 2 (Sept. 2): Nuclear Beginnings, Modern Literature, and Anthropocene Archives
Derrida “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Fell Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)” Diacritics 14:2 (1984)

Week 3 (Sept. 9): Trinity and the Sacrificial Zone
Silko, Ceremony
Gusterson, “Nuclear Weapons Testing as Scientific Ritual.” In People of the Bomb
Screening: (atomic test films): Trinity, Operation Cue, Plowshare.

Week 4 (Sept. 16): Environmental Design/ Media Theory
Sloterdijk, Terror from the Air
Kracauer: “Calico World,” “Photography” in The Mass Ornament
Screening: Steamboat Bill Jr. (Keaton, 1928)

Week 5 (Sept. 23): Nature and Enlightenment
Adorno and Horkheimer, “The Concept of Enlightenment”; “Excurses I: Odysseus of Myth and Enlightenment” in Dialectic of Enlightenment

Week 6 (Sept. 30): Natural History and the Problem of Evil (from Lisbon to Auschwitz)
Neiman, Evil in Modern Thought

Week 7 (Oct. 7). Capitalism and Cheap Nature
Moore, Capitalism and the Web of Life.

Week 8 (Oct 14): Climate Refugees
Nixon, “Introduction”; “Unimagined Communities: Megadam, Monumental Modernity, and Developmental Refugees” from Slow Violence: Ecology of the Poor
Recommended: Fay, “Introduction” and “Still Life” from In hospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene

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
Parrish, “Introduction,” “Modern Overflow” and “Modernism within a Second Nature” from The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History
Benjamin “Great Mississippi Flood.” “The Lisbon Earthquake”
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,” English Language Notes 54:2 (2016)

Week 12: Animals in a Second Nature
Van Dooren, Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction
Screening: Zoo (Wiseman, 1993)

Week 13: Queer Ecologies, Inhuman Survival
Whitney A. Bauman, “Queer Values for a Queer Climate” in Meaningful Flesh

Week 14: Thanksgiving:

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