

## U.S. CINEMA & THE ENVIRONMENT

**INSTRUCTOR:** Isaac Rooks

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

In October 2018, the UN warned that only “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” could prevent planetary disaster due to climate change. The burden of this responsibility cannot fall on scientists alone. This critical moment demands a response from all citizens. For their part, humanities scholars must consider the ways cultural products reflect and shape how the public thinks about and relates to the environment.

This course introduces how cinema can be studied from an ecocritical perspective. We will analyze how a wide variety of films treat the subject of nature. During the course of the semester, we will watch narrative features, documentaries, animated films, and experimental/avantgarde cinema. In order to focus our study, we will concentrate on American movies. Not only does the U.S. have a cinema industry of global significance, it also has the world’s second highest CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and a proclivity towards representatives who downplay or dismiss the dangers of climate change. It makes the U.S. a fitting case study for exploring how cinema comments upon the environment and humanity’s relationship to the world around them.

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### COURSE OBJECTIVES & LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Survey key scholars, concepts, terms, and debates in the environmental humanities, particularly as it relates to the study of cinema.
- Apply traditional methodologies of film analysis (including formal, theoretical, ideological, and industrial critique) to a developing critical orientation: ecocriticism.
- Analyze how a wide range of films reflect and affect attitudes and actions towards the natural world in a time of crisis.
- Investigate how ecological concerns intersect with, and expand, the traditional anthropocentric purview of the humanities.
- Consider the relationship between landscapes, nature, and the nation, and the benefits and drawbacks of addressing ecological issues using a localized frame.
- Move beyond interrogating the rhetoric of films explicitly about the environment to see how an ecocritical perspective might apply to all films.

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### READINGS

- Brereton, Pat. *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in Contemporary American Cinema*.
- *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*. Ed. Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt.
- *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*. Ed. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi.
- Hochman, Jhan. *Green Cultural Studies: Nature in Film, Novel, and Theory*.
- Ingram, David. *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema*.
- Murray, Robin L., and Joseph K. Heumann. *Ecology and Popular Film*.
- Whitley, David. *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation: From Snow White to Wall-E*.

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## ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

**Participation: 10%**

The success of this discussion-based class depends upon your active and informed participation. It is vital that you come to class ready to discuss readings and screenings, and to offer mature and thoughtful insights that forward the group's understanding of these texts and the subject.

**Presentation: 15%**

Students will give individual seven-minute long presentations analyzing the week's screening. Provide a clear thesis establishing your interpretation of the film and its significance in relation to class themes and readings. Your thesis must be supported by specific examples from the film, including an analysis of a key scene. To illustrate your analysis, you should play a clip from the film. This can be up to three minutes long and will not count towards your seven minutes.

**Key Words: 20%**

Students will get a list of possible "key words" – terms that ecocritical scholars should understand and be able to explain. Students will pick three terms and provide a 300-word write-up of each that: (1) defines the term; (2) explains its relevance to film/media studies; (3) provides a visual example (still image or clip) and a description of how that visual illustrates or explains the term; (4) cites two-three scholarly sources that informed your understanding of the term.

**Reading Responses: 25%**

All intellectual movements are marked by differences of opinions and spirited debates. You will notice that multiple readings for this class are in direct or indirect opposition. In each 500-word reading response, you must: (1) identify one of these debates and what is at stake; (2) analyze the relative merits and weaknesses of the opposing sides; (3) state your opinion. You will complete four of these over the course of the semester, working at a self-directed pace.

**Final Written Assignment: 30%**

Students will analyze a film or set of films utilizing methods derived from this course. Students can draw upon analytical methods and readings from outside the course, but must engage class readings and concepts. Papers must include a clear thesis statement and an in-depth analysis of the object(s) of study. Analysis should be supported by specific examples from the film(s). Papers should be 1500-2000 words, not counting the properly formatted Works Cited page.

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## CLASS SCHEDULE

### INTRODUCTION

**Week 1: Introduction to Course & American Environmentalism**

**Week 2: Ecocriticism, Cinema, and Production – Material v. Ideological Impact**

Screening: *Fast & Furious 6* (Lin, 2013)

**Week 3: Aesthetics & Ecology – Realism & Spectacle**

Screenings: *Study of a River* (Hutton, 1997) & *Koyaanisqatsi* (Reggio, 1982)

**LANDSCAPES & PEOPLE**

**Week 4: America's Mythic Frontier & Wilderness**

Screening: *Pale Rider* (Eastwood, 1985)

**Week 5: Indigenous Peoples & Nature**

Screening: *The Rider* (Zhao, 2017)

**Week 6: Race, Gender, Sexuality & Nature**

Screening: *Daughters of the Dust* (Dash, 1991)

**ANIMALS & PEOPLE**

**Week 7: Disneyfication – Animation & Documentaries**

Screenings: *Nature's Half Acre* (Algar, 1951) & *Bambi* (1942)

**Week 8: Seeing & Encountering Animals**

Screening: *Grizzly Man* (Herzog, 2005)

**RESPONDING TO CRISIS**

**Week 9: Environmental Justice & Activism – Documentaries & Narratives**

Screening: *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim, 2006)

**Week 10: Visualizing Invisible Threats**

Screening: *Safe* (Haynes, 1995)

**Week 11: Post-Nature. Post-Human. Postmodern.**

Screening: *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982)

**Week 12: Apocalyptic Narratives**

Screening: *Wall-E* (Stanton, 2008)

**CONCLUSION**

**Week 13: Expanding Horizons – Ecocriticism & Transnationalism**