

Media and the Environment (Spring 2023)

Seminar:

Tues: 1:30-4:20pm
Room: McMurtry 370

Professor: Shane Denson

Pronouns: he/him

Office: McMurtry 318

Office Hours: TBD

shane.denson@stanford.edu

Screenings (required):

Thur: 5:30-8:20pm
Room: McMurtry 115

Course Description:

How are environmental issues represented in various media, from cinema and television to videogames, VR, and experimental art? And how are these media themselves involved in environmental change? In this course, we look at media and the environment as interlocking parts of a system, inseparable from one another. We might start by asking how, for example, documentary and narrative films portray environmental crises like oil spills, wildfires, or extinction events. From there, however, we will need to investigate the ways that media themselves constitute environments, both metaphorically and literally. We swim in media; it is the air we breathe. Virtually all of our experience and communication take place within the spaces of media. Meanwhile, media-technologies and their infrastructures are increasingly entangled with the material environment: from rare earth metals in our electronic devices to undersea cables that bring us the Internet, digital media in particular are an increasingly significant driver of environmental change. In addition to reading and engaging with a variety of media objects, students will have the opportunity to create their own media objects (video essays, VR projects, experimental artworks, etc.) that shed light on the interrelations of media and the environment.

Required Textbooks:

Malm, Andreas. *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*. London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2021.

Peters, John Durham. *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Yusoff, Kathryn. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

Additional readings (listed in the course schedule) will be made available via Canvas.

Course Requirements and Grading:

For 3 Credits:

1. Regular attendance and preparation for class. This includes seminars and screenings. Irregular attendance will negatively affect your final grade. Active participation will help improve your final grade. Readings are to be completed by the date listed on the syllabus.
2. 4 short written, videographic, or experimental responses to the reading and/or viewing assignments, each submitted in a different week of the quarter: 2 textual and 2 practical assignments, to be completed in any order you choose. The 2 short text-based assignments (250-300 words) should discuss a media object or artwork that you deem relevant to our ongoing conversations and readings, explaining the specific contribution that it makes (e.g. further illuminating a dimension of a theorist's argument, adding something unanticipated or occluded in theoretical discussions, or providing an interesting comparison or counterpoint to the materials screened in class, etc.). The 2 practical assignments should comprise hands-on experiments, sketches, applications, or "things to think with"; they can respond directly to readings or more

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generally to questions and themes dealt with in the class. Each of the practical assignments should be of a different nature; examples of assignments include: photographic documentation of field investigations, data visualization, video (essayistic/argumentative/analytical), video (experimental), photogrammetry, AR, VR, etc. Please be prepared to present your assignment in class and explain its relevance. Collectively, these weekly assignments will count for 40% of your final grade.

3. Final paper or, with prior approval, a comparably rigorous critical media project. This assignment will count for 60% of your final grade.

For 4 Credits:

1. Regular attendance and preparation for class. This includes seminars and screenings. Irregular attendance will negatively affect your final grade. Active participation will help improve your final grade. Readings are to be completed by the date listed on the syllabus.
2. 6 short written, videographic, or experimental responses to the reading and/or viewing assignments, each submitted in a different week of the quarter: 2-3 textual and 3-4 practical assignments, to be completed in any order you choose. The text-based assignments (250-300 words) should discuss a media object or artwork that you deem relevant to our ongoing conversations and readings, explaining the specific contribution that it makes (e.g. further illuminating a dimension of a theorist's argument, adding something unanticipated or occluded in theoretical discussions, or providing an interesting comparison or counterpoint to the materials screened in class, etc.). The practical assignments should comprise hands-on experiments, sketches, applications, or "things to think with"; they can respond directly to readings or more generally to questions and themes dealt with in the class. Each of the practical assignments should be of a different nature; examples of assignments include: photographic documentation of field investigations, data visualization, video (essayistic/argumentative/analytical), video (experimental), photogrammetry, AR, VR, etc. Please be prepared to present your assignment in class and explain its relevance. Collectively, these weekly assignments will count for 40% of your final grade.
3. Final paper or, with prior approval, a comparably rigorous critical media project. This assignment will count for 60% of your final grade.

For 5 Credits:

1. Regular attendance and preparation for class. This includes seminars and screenings. Irregular attendance will negatively affect your final grade. Active participation will help improve your final grade. Readings are to be completed by the date listed on the syllabus.
2. 8 short written, videographic, or experimental responses to the reading and/or viewing assignments, each submitted in a different week of the quarter: 3-4 textual and 4-5 practical assignments, to be completed in any order you choose. The text-based assignments (250-300 words) should discuss a media object or artwork that you deem relevant to our ongoing conversations and readings, explaining the specific contribution that it makes (e.g. further illuminating a dimension of a theorist's argument, adding something unanticipated or occluded in theoretical discussions, or providing an interesting comparison or counterpoint to the materials screened in class, etc.). The practical assignments should comprise hands-on experiments, sketches, applications, or "things to think with"; they can respond directly to readings or more generally to questions and themes dealt with in the class. Each of the practical assignments should be of a different nature; examples of assignments include: photographic documentation of field investigations, data visualization, video (essayistic/argumentative/analytical), video (experimental), photogrammetry, AR, VR,

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etc. Please be prepared to present your assignment in class and explain its relevance. Collectively, these weekly assignments will count for 40% of your final grade.

3. Final paper or, with prior approval, a comparably rigorous critical media project. This assignment will count for 60% of your final grade.

Final Assignment:

There are two basic options for your final assignment: 1) a traditional term paper, or 2) a piece of scholarly videographic work (or related critical media project). Details for each type of assignment are listed below:

Option #1 – Term Paper:

Term papers (6-8 pages for 3 credits, 8-10 pages for 4 credits, 10-15 pages for 5 credits) are to be submitted by **Saturday, June 30, 2023 (no later than 6:30pm)**. The paper should be written in a scholarly format, with a complete bibliography, and should consist of the following:

1. A brief introduction outlining your topic and stating – as clearly and precisely as possible – the thesis of your paper. This section should usually be no more than one paragraph long.
2. A short description of the film(s) or other object(s) of your analysis. Here you should provide any essential background that might be needed for the reader to understand your analysis. You should assume an educated reader, who is familiar with film and media studies but perhaps has not seen the films (or other media) being discussed in your paper. If it is not relevant to your argument, do not engage in lengthy plot summaries. On the other hand, make sure that the reader has enough context (narrative or otherwise) to understand the more detailed analysis that follows. Overall, in this section you must find the right balance, which you can do by considering whether each detail is truly relevant and informative with respect to your argument. Anthropologist and cybernetician Gregory Bateson defined information as “a difference which makes a difference,” and you can use this formula as a test for determining which details truly belong in this section. If, for example, providing a plot summary or details about production costs and box-office revenues will make a difference with respect to your thesis (i.e. if a reader needs to know these things in order to process your argument), then this is clearly relevant and belongs in this section; on the other hand, if it doesn’t make a difference to your argument, then it probably doesn’t belong here. This section should usually be no more than 2-3 paragraphs long.
3. An in-depth analysis of the film(s) or other media object(s) under consideration. Your analysis should be interpretive and argumentative in nature. In other words, it is not enough simply to describe what you see on screen; you need also to persuade the reader that this is important, and that it has certain implications that may not be obvious at first glance. (If something is overly obvious, then it’s probably not very informative and certainly not worth arguing.) You are not just describing things but providing a “reading” of them. Keep in mind that the analysis you provide in this section constitutes the main support for your thesis statement. Your analysis is the argumentation that you offer to back up your thesis, while the thesis statement should be seen as the logical conclusion of your argument/analysis. In other words, while you have already told the reader what your thesis statement is (in the introduction), it is through your analysis that you must now prove that your thesis is correct or plausible. Ideally, after reading the analysis in this section, the reader should see your thesis statement as the logical outcome. Keeping this in mind as the test of success, you again need to ensure that your analysis is relevant and informative with respect to your thesis statement (if it doesn’t make a difference with regard to your thesis, then it can hardly prove it). In addition, you need to make sure that your analysis/argument proves your thesis *sufficiently*. This is a question of the scope of your thesis, and of your ability to prove it through your interpretive analysis. Have

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you claimed too much in your thesis? Not enough? Ideally, there should be a perfect match between what you claim in your thesis and what your analysis actually demonstrates. When writing this section, you may find that you have to adjust your thesis (and re-write your introduction accordingly) or look for stronger arguments to support it. This should be the longest section of your paper.

4. A brief conclusion. Try not to be too mechanical in summarizing and repeating what you've written, but do make sure that the conclusion demonstrates the paper's overall relevance and coherence. For example, you might return to a detail mentioned in the introduction and use it to highlight the significance of your argument: maybe the detail seemed rather unimportant before but has a very different meaning in the light of your analysis or interpretation. Foregrounding the transformative effect of your argument (i.e. the fact that it makes us see things differently) is a good way to demonstrate the overall importance of your paper, and the device of returning in the end to something mentioned at the beginning is an effective way of giving your paper closure. Obviously, though, it is not the only way to approach the conclusion. You might also demonstrate the relevance of your argument by opening up the scope even farther and considering the questions that your thesis raises for other areas of inquiry. Does your analysis suggest alternative readings for other films or media objects? Does it suggest the need to re-think various assumptions about cinema, about a given genre, or about some other aspect of media inquiry? However you decide to approach it, the point of the conclusion, generally speaking, is to take a step back from arguing for your thesis (you are supposed to be finished doing that by now) and to reflect, on a quasi meta-level, about the overall significance of your argument/thesis. This section should normally be one paragraph in length.
5. A full list of works cited, according to MLA (or other established) style.

In addition to the above guidelines, please consult the Duke Writing Studio's handout "Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy: Writing About Film" (<https://twp.duke.edu/uploads/assets/film.pdf>) when conceiving and writing your paper. The handout includes links to several other helpful resources, including similar handouts from Dartmouth and Yale. A more comprehensive guide is provided by Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*. Eighth Edition (Boston: Pearson, 2011).

Option #2 – Videographic/Critical Making Work:

If you choose instead to produce a videographic assignment or other type of critical media project, you should discuss your plans with me ahead of time (the earlier the better). You should also be prepared to screen an excerpt or rough cut of your project on the final day of class (**June 6, 2023**). In planning your project, think carefully about: the focus or object of your project, the specific method(s) to be employed, your reasons for choosing this approach to the topic, and your tentative thesis statement (or equivalent). Videographic/critical media work can be either argumentative or more experimental in nature, but you should justify in your proposal why your particular approach is suited both to your subject matter and to your own body of work and development as a scholar and/or practitioner. (A more experimental approach may seem to make more sense for students of art practice than for students of art history/film and media studies, but this is not necessarily true; be prepared to explain why your approach makes sense *for you*, in relation to your previous work, future projects, and larger academic or artistic interests.) The final project, which is to consist of your video/media work and a short (approx. 2-3 pages, in most cases) textual accompaniment, will be due on **Saturday, June 30, 2023 (no later than 6:30pm)**.

There are many possible types and modes of videographic and critical media work that you might choose to pursue, from documentary to experimental to academic. For examples of the latter, the quarterly peer-reviewed journal *[in]Transition* (<http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/intransition/>) might be consulted for a broader overview of existing work.

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Video essays and critical media projects need not (and probably should not) be structured like an academic term paper, but they should certainly provide evidence of scholarly research and the conventions pertaining to it. In this respect, it is worth thinking through the guidelines for term papers, above, and considering how and in what respects they either do or do not apply to practice-based work, which in terms of content and methodology might follow more traditional principles of humanities-based film studies or instead avail itself of the tools and techniques of digital humanities or other scholarly traditions.

More “experimental” approaches must also demonstrate a high level of practical and critical rigor. They should be executed in such a way as to illuminate or invite speculation about significant aspects of the work or works to which they respond – or the material, semiotic, or other central characteristics of media more generally. They may take the form of short videos, or they may employ other (computational or analog) means for generating images or other sensory contents that perform such work.

In all, the emerging field of videographic (and related) studies of moving-image image remains highly experimental and open to innovation. It will thus be one of our central tasks in this course to work through ideas about goals and methods, and more generally about the relations of videographic work to traditional film studies scholarship and to critically informed creative responses.

Writing Help:

Tutoring and other resources are available from the Hume Center for Writing and Speaking: <https://undergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/hume-center>.

Access and Accommodations:

Stanford is committed to providing equal educational opportunities for disabled students. Disabled students are a valued and essential part of the Stanford community. We welcome you to our class.

If you experience disability, please register with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate your needs, support appropriate and reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Academic Accommodation Letter for faculty. To get started, or to re-initiate services, please visit oea.stanford.edu.

If you already have an Academic Accommodation Letter, I invite you to share your letter with me. Academic Accommodation Letters should be shared at the earliest possible opportunity so I may partner with you and OAE to identify any barriers to access and inclusion that might be encountered in your experience of this course.

Course Policies:

Class policy on confidentiality: In our discussions and other course related meetings, we will follow a version of the “Chatham House Rule,” a standard which means any information shared in a meeting may be freely used, but not linked to a specific speaker. In today’s context, this means course discussions should not be audio or video recorded, shared, tweeted, etc. This does not apply to general statements about what you are learning in the course. It means rather that speakers in discussions may not be quoted directly in any material reproduced outside the classroom. This rule protects the unique environment we hope to foster with in-person, face to face education: a space where everyone may think out loud, try on ideas, restate and refine their thoughts, and most importantly, have the time and grace to change, amend, or confirm their ideas, opinions, and impressions.

Class policy on difficult material: In this course, we will read, view, learn about, and seriously engage thinkers and artists with ideas different than our own. At times, you may disagree strongly with these ideas, or

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experience them as personally troubling. You may find the language these writers use problematic, or even offensive. By enrolling in this class, you agree to the following: 1. Discussing or reading about ideas and engaging with artworks and media objects does not mean endorsing them. 2. Inclusion of a thinker, artist, or viewpoint on a syllabus does not mean the instructor agrees with or endorses this perspective. 3. The historical significance of a text is distinct from current assessments of its argument or merits. 4. To engage historical texts and artworks with fidelity and accuracy, students, teachers, and scholars may encounter and engage with concepts and images that today are considered inappropriate or offensive; all members of the class accept and are prepared for this dimension of analysis and education. At the same time, speakers are expected to exercise good judgement and empathy when working with difficult material; in many cases, paraphrase may be called for. Our basic assumption will be one of good faith, which means actively assuming the best intentions of others. If any member of the course community feels another participant is not engaging ideas or the course material in good faith, they should raise these concerns privately with the professor.

Course Schedule:

Week 1

04.04. Media and/or Environment

READINGS: Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene'" (in *Global Change Newsletter* 41, pp. 17-18);

T.J. Demos, "Welcome to the Anthropocene!" and "Geoengineering the Anthropocene" (Chapters 1 and 2 in *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*)

Mark B. N. Hansen, "Media Theory"

04.06. Screening: HOW TO BLOW UP A PIPELINE (Daniel Goldhaber, 2022)

Week 2

04.11. Theory/Practice: How to Blow Up a Pipeline

SPECIAL GUEST: Jordan Sjol, Writer and Executive Producer on *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, and PhD Candidate in the Program in Literature, Duke University

READINGS: Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*

04.13. Screening: LEVIATHAN (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel, 2012)

Week 3

04.18. Media Environments 1: Water

READINGS: John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds*: Introduction, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2

04.20. Screening: UPSTREAM COLOR (Shane Carruth, 2013)

Week 4

04.25. Media Environments 2: Earth

READINGS: Douglas Kahn, *Earth Sound Earth Signal*, Introduction and Chapters 3, 4, 5, 11, and 12

04.27. Screening: THE ENCLAVE (Richard Mosse, 2013) & INCOMING (Richard Mosse, 2017)

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Week 5

05.01. Media Environments 3: Fire

READINGS: Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message" and "Media Hot and Cold" (Chapters 1 and 2 in *Understanding Media*);

Nicole Starosielski, *Media Hot and Cold*: Introduction and Chapter 5;

John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds*: Chapter 3

05.04. Screening: TEN SKIES (James Benning, 2004)

Week 6

05.09. Media Environments 4: Air

READINGS: Eva Horn, "Air as Medium";

John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds*: Chapters 4 and 5

05.11. Screening: STEAMBOAT BILL, JR. (Charles Reisner and Buster Keaton, 1928)

Week 7

05.16. (Post)Cinematic Environments

READINGS: Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World*: Introduction and Chapter 1;

Shane Denson, *Discorrelated Images*: Chapter 1 and Chapter 6

05.18. Screening: HUMAN FLOW (Ai Weiwei, 2017)

Week 8

05.23. Art Medium Environment

SPECIAL EVENT: Panel presentations by David Bardeen, UCLA; Cambra Sklarz, UC Riverside; and Bryan Norton, Stanford

MUSEUM VISIT: Cantor Museum

READINGS: Alexander Nemerov, *The Forest: A Fable of America in the 1830s*, Parts One and Two

05.25. Screening: VERTIGO SEA (John Akomfrah, 2015)

Week 9

05.30. The Elements Redux

READINGS: Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*;

T..J. Demos, "Feeding the Ghost: John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*" (Chapter 1 in *Beyond the World's End*)

06.01. Screening: CONTAINMENT (Peter Galison and Robb Moss, 2015)

Week 10

06.06. Planetary Media

READINGS: Kate Crawford, "Earth" (Chapter 1 in *Atlas of AI*);

Peter K. Haff, "Technology as a Geological Phenomenon: Implications for Human Well-Being";

Giulia Rispoli, "Planetary Environing: The Biosphere and the Earth System";

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Benjamin Bratton, "The Black Stack";

Vinícius Portella, "Planetary-Scale Computation and the Ground of Nature"

Finals Week

06.10. Final Paper/Project Due by 6:30pm!