E58.2400 Topics in Visual Culture and Cultural Studies: Modernity and Climate Change
Spring 2010

Instructor: Nicholas Mirzoeff

Weds 2.10-4.25
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Office hours: Friday 10.30-12.30

This seminar class considers the ways in which modernity and climate change have been mutually constitutive as global phenomena. We ask whether climate can be considered a medium in its own right as the interface between humans and the biosphere, taking the sea as a particular example. 1) integrate a certain cultural studies tradition into the culture of climate change 2) argue for a mutually constitutive interface of modernity and climate change and 3) suggest that the so-called 'hard science' approach is not going to produce a political solution which will rather require a politics of the imagination as the UEA email scandal has amply demonstrated. The class will examine how this interaction has been visualized and how it should be theorized in four sections. The first section introduces key concepts from visual and cultural studies, including a consideration of the outcome of the Copenhagen climate conference. a genealogy of the present crisis will be explored from the formation of the concept of the high seas and sovereign sea power in the seventeenth century; to the nineteenth century paradigm shift in which Darwin transformed the sea from a dead zone into the source of all life; and the emergence of a global environmental emergency that began with the contamination of the sea by radiation
from nuclear weapons and waste in the 1950s to the present crisis of melting ice, water acidification and sea-level rise. Each moment is considered in media representation, contemporary writings and present-day critical theory and interpretation. Students will form a proposal for further study and actively shape our exploration of the topic by their presentations.

Class practice

The class centers around the active student-led exploration of texts, concepts and media. It is process-driven rather than a drive towards “the paper.” Each student will lead two discussions (sign up on the Blackboard site) and present their final project. However, every seminar member is responsible for coming to meetings ready and willing to participate. Engaging with class materials means (at a minimum):

- Preparing summary assessments of materials
- Highlighting specific passages that you want to discuss
- Producing specific questions for the group at points where you were unsure what was meant; wanted to link to other readings in the class; or raising issues of theory or method

We do not want to spend too much time finding fault or error in the readings so much as building a set of tools towards a critical engagement with climate change.

The final project is to construct individual or collaborative contributions to that goal: these might be based on reporting on-going events, reviewing and critiquing a media project, a theoretical contribution, a new media project, or a combination of all of the above. The projects will be posted to the web, either at The New Everyday section of Media Commons or to a stand-alone page on the NYU server.

Required Books

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*

Recommended

Jonathan Raban (ed.), *The Oxford Book of the Sea*
Bill McKibben (ed.), *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*

Articles can be found via databases, or, when indicated in the MCC PDF reserve at [http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/mcc/resources/pdf_archive](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/mcc/resources/pdf_archive) (net ID and password required)
Schedule of Meetings

1. January 20 Introductions

Part One: Concepts

2. January 27
Writing and seeing climate change

Undertake a short writing exercise in climate/sea writing in NYC—either set out for a specific assignment like the Love Canal, Fresh Kills landfill, a sewage treatment plant, the waterfront etc; or “drift” and see what you see.

3. February 3
Imagining Climate Change:

4. February 10
The Politics of Climate Change
http://www.islandsfirst.org/index.html especially "issues" tab.

**Part Two: The Sea**

5. February 17

Cosmologies of the Sea


Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun, "The Sea Is History," from *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean*.

6. February 24

Modernity and the Sea


7. March 3

The Life and Death of the Sea


Viewing: *The End of the Line* (2009); *Jaws* (1975)

**Aporia**

8. March 10

Nuclear Imaginaries

Jacques Derrida, “No apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)

Akira Lippit from *Atomic Light*

Viewing: *Hiroshima mon Amour* (1959); *Dr Strangelove* (1964)

SPRING BREAK
Part Three: The systemic crises of modernity and climate change
9. March 24
Poison World
Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, chs 1-4, 8, 10-11, 17;
Rachel Carson, from *The Sea Around Us*; from: Mark
Hamilton Lyle, *Rachel Carson*; Marla Cone, “Unexpected
Poisons”

10. March 31
The End of Nature
Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* Introduction, Part 1 and
‘A Path of More Resistance’ (145-186); Charles Darwin,
*The Origin of Species* (1859), chapter one: “Variation
Under Domestication”; Stuart Mclean, “Stories and
Cosmogonies: Imagining Creativity Beyond ‘Nature’ and
‘Culture’,” from *Cultural Anthropology* (May 2009).
See [http://www.350.org](http://www.350.org)

11. April 7
The Katrina crisis
Spike Lee, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem for New
Orleans* (2006), acts III and IV.

Part Four: Here and Now
12. April 14
Imagining sustainability
Sustainable Imaginations
Tim Jackson *Prosperity Without Growth* (Sustainable
Development Commission, 2009); Dirk Hebel / Joerg
Stollmann, “Sustainable Aesthetics of the Pathological”
(Zurich Architecture Institute, 2009), Emily Apter, “The
aesthetics of critical habitats,” *October* (Winter, 2002).
Please visit: Tino Seghal, performative exhibition at the
Guggenheim Museum, January 29-March 10,
And/or “Rising Currents” at MoMA March 24-August 9,
[http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1031](http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1031)

13. April 21
Presentation of student projects I
14. April 28
Presentation of student projects II
Background/further readings:


Charles Darwin, *The Voyages of the Beagle* (1837); *The Descent of Man* (1871)

Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1860)


Peter Neill (ed.) *American Sea Writing* (Library of America, 2000)

Tyler Volk, *Co2 Rising* (MIT, 2008)


Mark Monmonnier, *Coastlines: How Mapmakers Frame the World and Chart Environmental Change* (Chicago, 2008)


Mark Kurlansky, *Cod* (1997)


Gerard Maclean and Donna Landry (eds), *The Country and the City Revisited* (Cambridge 1999)


Ira Livingston, *Between Science and Literature* 2006)


Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (2006)