

## **LS 819: Selected Topics – Fall 2023**

### **Thinking about “Nature”, Thinking about Film**

Instructor: Christopher Pavsek, Associate Professor of Film, School for the Contemporary Arts

Tuesdays, 6:30 – 9:20 pm – In Person – HC Room 1525

This course will consider two related things: the ways in which people have historically thought about the natural (or non-human) world, and, more specifically the ways in which moving images have represented and engaged with the natural world. In short, the course lies at the intersection of environmental thought and cinema history and will consider how the two fields might reflect, shape, inform, influence, and challenge each other. A broader goal of the class is to critically reflect on how humans might address—think about, change, contend with—the multiple, linked environmental and social challenges facing the world today.

Clearly, the natural world has been going through dramatic transformations in the past several decades; similarly, environmental thinking has gone through what some scholars have called a “revolution” during the same time, in part in response to the dramatic changes in the environment and in part in response to dramatic changes in human social relations.

We will consider these changes in environmental thinking in relation to some classic texts in North American environmental thought: we’ll bring together writings by John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson (amongst others), with recent developments that challenge some of the assumptions about “wilderness”, the separation between humans and non-humans, the place of spirituality in nature, the usefulness of nature, and so on that were central to classic environmental thinking. The recent developments we look at will include a range of readings from environmental historians like William Cronon, who has rethought the “wilderness ideal” in American and Canadian conservation; the authors of the “ecomodernist” manifesto and others who accept the integration of the natural world into modern technological and economic systems; to advocates for an “environmentalism of the poor” that challenge the domination of environmental thought by “First World”thinkers; to “pragmatic revolutionaries” like Bram Büscher who call for “convivial conservation” that seeks a harmonious relation between human and non-human communities; to recent Indigenous thought, by writers such as Leanne Simpson and the authors of “The End of This World” manifesto, who advocate for a broader acknowledgment and incorporation of Indigenous approaches to nature in global conservation efforts.

Alongside these thinkers we will watch a selection of films throughout the semester, with a particular emphasis on relatively recent films, that in one way or another address

the natural world and many of the ideas we will encounter in our readings. These films will range widely in style and content, from classic “blue chip” documentaries about the natural world (selections from the BBC’s “Planet Earth”), to politically inflected films (“An Inconvenient Truth”), to recent films that reflect in various ways on the deeply entangled relationships between natural worlds and the human worlds (“Geographies of Solitude,” “The Two Sights”, “All That Breathes”), to films that address issues of Indigenous conservation (“Angry Inuk”, “Wild Archaeology”-excerpts, “Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change”).

### **Assignments:**

Assignments will include (subject to change):

- I Short essay
- I Final Essay
- I Presentation
- Active participation

### **Readings:**

Readings will mostly be provided via Canvas. The reading list will be finalized during the summer of 2023.

Readings will include works by:

- Edward Abbey: *Desert Solitaire* (excerpts)
- Angela Alook, Emily Eaton, et al., "The End of This World" (excerpts)
- Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher, *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene* (excerpts)
- Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (excerpts)
- Eileen Crist et al., *Keeping the Wild: Against the Domestication of the Earth* (excerpts)
- William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness"; *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (excerpts)
- Jessica Dempsey, *Enterprising Nature* (excerpts)
- Ramachandra Guha, selected essays
- Christopher Ketcham, *This Land* (excerpts)
- Elisabeth Kolbert, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* (excerpts)
- Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (excerpts)
- Juan Martinez-Alier, *Environmentalism of the Poor* (excerpts)
- Douglas McCauley, "Selling out on nature"
- John Muir, selections

Roderick Nash: *Wilderness and the American Mind* (excerpts)  
Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (excerpts)  
Ted Nordhaus, et al, "An Ecomodernist Manifesto" (and responses)  
Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done* (excerpts)  
Henry David Thoreau, selections

Films will include: (amongst others):

Leanne Alison and Jeremy Mendes, *Bear 71*  
Alethea Arnaquq-Baril *Angry Inuk*  
Joshua Bonnetta, *The Two Sights*  
Alastair Fothergill et al, *Planet Earth*  
Davis Guggenheim, *An Inconvenient Truth*  
Zacharias Kunuk, *Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change*  
Jacquelyn Mills, *Geographies of Solitude*