
The End of Nature: Culture and Catastrophe

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GERM 294-01/ENVI 294-03
Tu/Th 9:40 – 11:10am
HUM 213
Spring 2022



The Lisbon Earthquake (1755)

From disaster films, apocalyptic eco-literature, to conservationist warnings about the loss of nature, catastrophe holds a special place in the Western environmental imaginary. In this course, we will explore the role narratives of catastrophe play in framing our relation to the natural world through the study of literature, art, film, ecocritical and scientific writings. Where is the border between natural and anthropogenic ecological disasters? To what degree has our understanding of the natural world and ecological crisis changed from the pre-Romantic period to today? And how does the concept of nature at risk figure into contemporary environmentalist discourse, from the fear of species extinction and the idea of nature's decline, to the desire to return nature to an imagined pure, wild state? We will examine such issues from an ecocritical perspective based on the insight that we are currently living in a new age of the Anthropocene, an epoch defined by human influence on the environment, a period in which the relation between nature and humanity has become more complex than ever, demanding new ways of thinking about our entanglement with the natural world. Sample topics include: anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, and multispecies kinship; deep versus social ecology; hybridity and the animal-human relation; hyperobjects and the limits of the environmental imagination.

Learning Objectives:

- I. Writing proficiency: we will work together on developing your writing skills (mechanics and substance) throughout the term through short writing assignments and structured essays.

- II. Oral proficiency: you will have several opportunities to hone your speaking skills through in-class discussions and an oral presentation; over the semester you will also gain a vocabulary for analyzing and interpreting issues central to the environmental humanities
- III. Information literacy: over the term we will practice select skills, including how to develop a research question, summarize an argument effectively, search scholarly databases, and cite evidence correctly

Guidelines and Expectations

Required Texts. The only text you are required to obtain a physical copy of is W.G. Sebald's *After Nature*, which we will be studying near the end of the term. All other readings and materials will be provided via Moodle, and all films will be available to stream online. You are expected to always have assigned readings and materials with you in class, whether in print or via a computer or tablet.

Attendance. This is a discussion-based seminar and there is typically no way to make up what you miss in class. Regular attendance is paramount to your success. Please email me in advance if you will miss class. Students are expected to attend three meetings per week, with **no more than three excused absences (no questions asked)**. For each absence after three, your overall grade will be lowered a half letter (B changes to B- etc.). However, I acknowledge that is an unusually difficult time for many of us and that health and other factors may interfere with your ability to attend class. **Please get in contact with me if there are extenuating circumstances you would like to discuss.** When feasible, I am happy to be flexible and work with you to find alternative solutions to support your success in the course.

Participation. You are encouraged to **participate actively** by contributing to class discussions, taking notes, and engaging fully during group activities. While you are encouraged to speak often, please be self-aware of your role within the classroom. If you tend to be a quieter student, consider ways that you can contribute more to the class discussions. If you tend to be more vocal, consider when it would be opportune to let others speak.

It is important that we all **respect** the perspectives of others in the seminar. This includes not only comments made in class and on virtual learning platforms, but also actively listening to the viewpoints of fellow students, allowing others to speak without interrupting, and always having your phone and other distractions put away during our class meetings.

Discussion Board. You will be asked to regularly **post to the “Discussion Forum” on Moodle**. The online discussion board will play a key role in the course as the virtual extension of our in-class dialogue. For homework, I will often ask you to post a short response (10-12 sentences) addressing one of the upcoming works. Occasionally, you will receive specific prompts or guidelines, but most often it will be open topic. **Posts are due by 8:40am**. A-level work means not only regular completion of the assigned posts, but a deep level of engagement with the assigned materials. You are permitted three missed discussion board posts for any reason.

Homework Assignments. For most class sessions, you will have texts to read and/or films or artworks to analyze and an accompanying discussion board post to complete. In lieu of the discussion board, you will occasionally be given other tasks, including handouts, video posts, or other assignments. It is your responsibility to **complete and submit this work before class** (by the

time indicated on the detailed weekly schedules posted to Moodle). Make sure to bring such work with you to class, as we will often review it together. You should **expect to spend approximately 2 hours on homework and preparation for each class session**. Please contact me if you are working more than this amount.

Discussion Leadership. Once during the term, you will assume the role of discussion leader for an assigned text or film. For approximately half of the class session, you will guide us through key themes and issues pertaining to the material through a brief presentation, targeted questions, and individual or group activities. In preparation, you will receive more specific guidelines and we will review together possibilities for how to structure your session as discussion leader.

Writing Assignments (2 essays)

- **First essay (4-5 pages):** you will receive a prompt and instructions approximately one week in advance. You will receive feedback and have the chance to submit a revision.
- **Final essay (9-10 pages, includes 1-page abstract):** In preparation for the final essay (and as part of the overall task), you will work in consultation with me to develop an individual research question based on course materials. You will submit an abstract outlining the planned essay and receive feedback in advance of starting your project.
- All papers will be graded for both content and style/structure/expression. Always proofread carefully before turning in writing assignments.

Formatting (for all written assignments)

- saved as a Word.doc
- Times New Roman; font, size 12, double-spaced with 1-inch margins and page numbers
- Include a heading (Name/Date/Course) and title

Submission:

Submit via the assigned Dropbox provided on Moodle. No assignments will be accepted via e-mail. Late submission of papers will result in a grade penalty unless you are given an extension. Please get in touch at least 3 days before the due date to request an extension.

Grading:

Attendance	10%
Participation	15%
Discussion Posts & HW	25%
Discussion Leadership	15%
First Essay	15%
Final Essay	20%



Edward Burtynsky, *VeronaWalk* (2012)

Weekly Schedule

Thurs. 1/20 Introduction: Course Overview
Lecture: The Cultural and Philosophical Significance of the Lisbon Earthquake

Natural Catastrophe: The Divine and the Sublime

Tues. 1/25 Heinrich von Kleist, "The Earthquake in Chile" (251-267)

Thurs. 1/27 Immanuel Kant, "Analytic of the Sublime" from *The Critique of Judgment* (97-126)

Tues. 2/1 *Class Cancelled*

Thurs. 2/3 Immanuel Kant, "Analytic of the Sublime" (continued)
Caspar David Friedrich, Selected Paintings & Short Video "The Sea of Ice"

The Anthropocene and the "End of Nature" Thesis

Tues. 2/8 Bill Mckibben, "A New World" (1-46) from *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*

Thurs. 2/10 William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness" (1-20)
Leo Marx, "The Idea of Nature in America" (8-21)

Tues. 2/15 Film: *Anthropocene, The Human Epoch* (Dir. Edward Burtynsky)
Lucy Edwards, "What is the Anthropocene"

Extinction and Conservation in Environmentalist Discourse

Thurs. 2/17 Elizabeth Kolbert, "The Sixth Extinction" (4-22), "The Mastodon's Molars" (23-46), and "Welcome to the Anthropocene" (92-110) from *The Sixth Extinction*

Tues. 2/22 Ursula Heise, "Lost Dogs, Last Birds, and Listed Species: Elegy and Comedy in Conservation Stories" (19-54) from *Imagining Extinction*

Thurs. 2/24 Heise, "The Legal Lives of Endangered Species: Biodiversity Laws and Culture" (87-126) from *Imagining Extinction*

Sun. 2/26 *First Essay due at Noon (via Moodle Dropbox)*

Narrating Catastrophe: The Environmental Imagination

Tues. 3/1 Timothy Morton, "Viscosity" (27-37) and "Nonlocality" (38-54) from *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*

- Thurs. 3/3** Film: *The Day After Tomorrow* (Dir. Roland Emmerich)
- Tues. 3/8** Alan Weisman, “A Lingering Scent of Eden” (9-14), “Unbuilding Our Home” (15-20), “The Petro Patch” (129-144) and “The World Without Us” (145-168) from *The World Without Us*
- Thurs. 3/10** Yoko Tawada, “The Island of Eternal Life” (3-11), “Ten Years after Fukushima” (93-94)
“They Failed” (anonymous poem written shortly after the Chernobyl disaster)
- 3/12 – 3/20** *Spring Break – No Classes*
- Tues. 3/22** Short Film: *Plastic Bag* (Dir. Ramin Bahrani)
Film: *Plastic Planet* (Dir. Werner Boote)

Deep Ecology, Social Ecology, and Ecofeminism

- Thurs. 3/24** Arne Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement”
Murray Bookchin, “Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology”
- Tues. 3/29** Rob Nixon, “Slow Violence, Gender, and the Environmentalism of the Poor” (128-149) from *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*
- Thurs. 3/31** Greta Gaard, “Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature” (1-10) from *Ecofeminism*
- Tues. 4/5** Franz Kafka, “Report for an Academy”
Naama Harel, *Kafka’s Zoopoetics: Beyond the Human-Animal Barrier* (excerpt)

Ecocentrism and Multispecies Kinship

- Thurs. 4/7** Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Nature,” “A Commentary on the Aphoristic Essay ‘Nature,’” “Empirical Observation and Science,” “In Honor of Luke Howard,” and “Colors in the Sky”
- Tues. 4/12** David Abram, “The Forgetting and Remembering of the Air” (225-260) from *The Spell of the Sensuous*
- Thurs. 4/14** W.G. Sebald, *After Nature*
- Tues. 4/19** Sebald, *After Nature* (continued)
- Thurs. 4/21** Donna Haraway, “Playing String Figures with Companion Species” (9-29) from *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*
- Tues. 4/26** Haraway, “Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Cthulucene” (30-57) from *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*

Thurs. 4/28 Final Discussion

Final Essay Due: 5/10 (via Moodle Dropbox)