

ENGLISH 695 / WINTER 2014
RESOURCE CULTURE: OIL IN FICTION AND THEORY
Wednesdays, 630 pm to 930 pm / HC 1-15

Imre Szeman
imre@ualberta.ca
Office hours: Weds, 500-600 pm / HC 4-79

We have come to expect that literature will name the governing ideologies of an era, whether by announcing them in its narrative and formal contradictions and antinomies, or in its attempt to puncture through ideology (however incompletely) via formal innovation, novel subject matter, and so on. And yet, in an era shaped to very high degree by a single substance – oil – there have been few fictions that have grappled in a serious way with the cultural, social and political realities of what we might term ‘petromodernity’—that is, with oil’s transformative capacity as an energy source. It is this unique capacity of oil that has underwritten the massive expansion and intensification of capitalism and technology, with repercussions for human populations and the environment with which we are only beginning to grapple.

This course will probe the range of questions and concerns that arise for literary and cultural criticism if we take oil seriously as a substance fundamental to the cultural and social forms that have taken shape since its discovery in the mid-nineteenth century. In his 1992 essay “Petrofiction,” novelist and essayist Amitav Ghosh famously lamented the lack of fictions dealing with oil’s role in shaping U.S. society, specifically its relations with the Middle East. The class will explore not only novels and films that *have* attempted to deal with the fundamental character of oil for contemporary experience, but the multiple sites at which our petromodernity is being named, confronted, and theorized. In doing so, we will consider not only the significance of oil as a theme in contemporary culture, but what it might mean to figure oil (and energy more generally) as an essential dimension of literary-critical method.

If we now think about oil more than ever, it is because we have started to worry about the implications of its limits or impending lack, even while we continue to indulge in the fiction of energy surplus and act as if what is of necessity an unrepeatable historical event (the use of oil as our primary energy source) will define daily life on into the future, without major change or crisis. The fiction of surplus in which we subsist shapes not only the belief that there will always be plenty of energy to go around, but the complimentary idea that easy access to energy has had (at best) a secondary role to play in history in comparison to (say) human intellect and the adventure of progress. Which is to say: it is not just energy that constitutes a limit, but also the way we presently understand its social role and significance. The aim of this course is to try (in whatever small way) to help students push past these limits in the ‘how’, ‘why’ and even ‘if’ of their own critical practice.

REQUIRED TEXTS

The core books (and recommended titles) for this course are available at the U of Alberta bookstore. Essays assigned in addition to these books will be made available to students via PDFs in Dropbox or articles placed on reserve in the Salter Reading Room.

Core Texts

Steven **Amsterdam**, *Things We Didn't See Coming*

Paolo **Bacigalupi**, *The Windup Girl*

J.G. Ballard, *Concrete Island*

Jane **Bennett**, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*

James Howard **Kunstler**, *The Long Emergency*

Timothy **Mitchell**, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*

Matthew **Huber**, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*

Allan **Stoekl**, *Bataille's Peak: Energy, Religion, and Postsustainability*

Recommended Texts

Andrew Nikiforuk, *The Energy of Slaves*

Jeff Rubin, *The End of Growth*

COURSE SCHEDULE

- January 8 *Introduction: Why Resources?*
Amitav Ghosh, "Petrofictions"; "Literature in the Ages of Wood..."
Recommended: Robert Eaglestone, "Contemporary Fiction in the Academy: Towards a Manifesto"
- January 15 *Naming the Problem: Emergencies, Peaks, Slaves, Excess*
James Howard Kunstler, *The Long Emergency* (2005); John Urry, "Consuming the Planet to Excess" (2010). *Recommended:* Andrew Nikiforuk, *The Energy of Slaves* (2012); Jeff Rubin, *The End of Growth* (2012) (I will suggest excerpts)
- January 22 *History*
Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (excerpts); Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses"
- January 29 *Philosophy I – Energopolitics*
Dominic Boyer, "Energopolitics and the Anthropology of Energy"; Allan Stoekl, *Bataille's Peak: Energy, Religion, and Postsustainability*, Part 1
- February 5 Cancelled

- February 12 *Philosophy 2 - Things and Materialities*
Stoekl, Part 2; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (excerpts)
- February 19 *Reading Week*
- February 26 *Melancholia (and other modes of being in relation to oil)*
Lauren Berlant, “Cruel Optimism”; Lauren Berlant, “Thinking about Feeling Historical”; Stephanie LeMenager, “Petro-Melancholia: The BP Blowout and the Arts of Grief”; *Recommended*; Imre Szeman, “System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster”; Jennifer Wenzel, “Consumption for the Common Good?”; Slavoj Zizek, “How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?”
- March 5 *Capitalism and Slow Violence*
Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (excerpts); Matthew Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (excerpts)
- March 12 *Automobility*
J.G. Ballard, *Concrete Island*; John Urry, “Inhabiting the Car”; John Urry, *Mobilities* (excerpts)
- March 19 **Due:** Conference Abstracts
- March 26 Conference Presentations
- April 2 *Post-Oil*
Steven Amsterdam, *Things We Didn’t See Coming*; Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl*; *Recommended*: Peter Hitchcock, “Oil in an American Imaginary”; Graeme MacDonald (from *RCT*)
- April 9 Wrap up discussion: Wither resources today?

EVALUATION

• Seminars	20%
• Participation	10%
• Conference Abstract and Title	10%
• Conference Presentations	20%
• Final Paper	40%
TOTAL	100%

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

a. Seminars (20%)

Students will be expected to present **one** thirty-minute seminar presentation during the term. The seminar will focus on one or more of the readings that are assigned for the class. Your task will not only be to offer a reading/interpretation/overview of the essay(s), but to

- (a) offer context, framing the piece within the work of the writer, the themes of the course, and the broader intellectual movements within which it operates;
- (b) explain especially difficult concepts in the written material;
- (c) describe the core problem or issue that the piece seeks to address (e.g., the conceptual blockages it hopes to move past, the new paradigm it seeks to create, etc.); and
- (d) explore what avenues of interpretation/investigation the piece opens up (e.g., how does it change our approach to the study of a cultural object or practice?)

Students are expected to create a one- to two-page handout for their colleagues, which will be distributed at the beginning of the class. As part of this handout, you should have three or more additional works with a one to two sentence annotation of what the book or article is about.

The aim of seminars is for us to learn more together than we could learn alone by sharing our labour. Consider your presentation as a small contribution to the group project of learning about literary/cultural theory in which we are engaged.

b. Participation (10%)

Above Average Participation Mark:

- Student volunteers ideas or questions to help discussion once it starts, and when called on offers well-considered responses.

"A" Grade Participation Mark

- Student attends all classes and consistently.
- Volunteers questions or points of interest from the assigned readings to generate discussion.
- Offers ideas willingly in discussion, and makes certain contributions are on point and thoughtful.
- Responds to other students' ideas by asking questions or building on their points.

c. Conference Paper Presentation (30%)

- Conference Abstract and Title 10%
- Conference Presentation (paper and presentation) 20%

Students will be expected to develop an original, conference-length paper (10 pages **max**; 12-15 min presentation). This paper will be presented during an in-class conference that will take place on March 26. Each student will get **no more** than 15 minutes to make their presentation (they will be timed). As the grade for this element will be based

primarily on their presentation, students should consider the manner in which they plan to present their work (e.g., will you simply read the paper? work off point form notes? etc.)

In advance of the presentation, students will be asked to submit a title and a 250 word abstract of their paper. This will be due on March 19th.

Final Paper (20-25 pages; 40%)

Your final paper may be on any subject as long as it is related to the course material. You may want to focus directly on a particular concept or theory, exploring the ways in which it has developed and what its productivity is today. Or you could make use of the ideas and criticisms that we have engaged in to guide a critical analysis of an image, an object, a form of technology, a social movement, an institution, an historical development, a text, a political situation, etc. All references should be cited in proper MLA style. Remember to keep copies of all your work in case anything goes astray. Essays are due no later than **April 16, 2014 by 4:30pm**. You should feel free to bounce ideas off of me at any point during the term; I will make extra time available to discuss paper topics close to the end of term. *Please email a copy of your final paper to me!*

Policy about course outlines can be found in Section 23.4(2) of the University Calendar.

The University of Alberta is committed to the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty. Students are expected to be familiar with these standards regarding academic honesty and to uphold the policies of the University in this respect. Students are particularly urged to familiarize themselves with the provisions of the Code of Student Behaviour (online at www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/secretariat/studentappeals.cfm) and avoid any behaviour which could potentially result in suspicions of cheating, plagiarism, misrepresentation of facts and/or participation in an offence. Academic dishonesty is a serious offence and can result in suspension or expulsion from the University.