

English 5973
Climate Fiction: Apocalypse and Utopia
McCain 1116; 2:35 pm-4:25 pm

Dr. Jason Haslam

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Course Description

There has been a recent wave of academic and popular interest in fiction that takes climate change as its focus. Coined “cli-fi” by Dan Bloom, this oeuvre has been traced back to flood mythology in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and other apocalyptic narratives, as well as to Romantic lyrics and modernist “back-to-nature” novels and movements. Most often, however, cli-fi is associated with contemporary science fiction—especially in its utopian and dystopian forms—that represents and analyzes anthropogenic climate change, often taking us back, so to speak, to the apocalypse. This course will begin by examining some of the progenitors of contemporary cli-fi—with special attention paid to the nineteenth century—before moving onto its central focus: the representation of climate change in contemporary science fiction. Therefore, in addition to discussions of ecocriticism and ecocritical theory, we will also examine theories of science fiction and utopia, and explore the benefits and paradoxes of using non-realist forms and tropes to discuss material change. We will primarily study literary works, but film and other forms will be discussed. Topics to be explored could include but are not limited to petrocultures; the intersections of social marginalization and climate change; Romantic, neo-Romantic and Gothic representations of nature; non-human subjectivities; technology, cyborgs, and utopia/dystopia; Indigenous SF and climate change; the use of SF tropes in scientific and political documents; human extinction.

Method of Evaluation

Assignments and Weightings

Weekly discussion questions: 10%

Discussion Question Presentation: 10%

Analytical Presentation: 20%

Final Essay: 50%

Class Participation: 10%

Assignment Descriptions

Weekly discussion questions: For each class, starting on September 13, students will submit one discussion question/critical thought about the material. These should be specific questions, addressing particular aspects of the material read. These questions will form the basis of discussions for our weekly meetings. **Questions must be submitted at least 48 hours in advance (so people can complete the “discussion-question presentation” assignment), through the discussion board on Brightspace/OWL. Late questions will receive a grade of zero.**

The grade will consist of the following: 1 point will be given for each week’s submitted question to a maximum of 10 points for the term. Questions *must* indicate specific knowledge of the work, and indicate thoughtful consideration of them. If a question does not indicate these, the instructor will

communicate that to the student, and how to address it, before the next class. If the issues are not addressed in future questions, those questions will receive a grade of zero.

Students do not submit questions on days when they are presenting (see below).

Discussion-question presentation: This assignment consists of two parts. First, you will prepare a summary of the thoughts raised by your colleagues in the week's discussion questions. A good method for this is to group the questions into a few topics (for example: do many of the questions address a specific theme?). This first part should take no more than 5 minutes. Second, you will then offer a short list of topics to start discussion, based on your consideration of the texts and the questions, and help lead the class discussion for approximately 20-30 minutes. On days when there are analytical presentations, this will take place in the second half of class. On days when there are no presentations, this will take place in the first half of class.

You should be prepared to help generate discussion in the class, and move the discussion along when a topic is fully covered, or starts to wane. The discussion may well move off your specific topics, and that should be encouraged so long as the discussion stays focussed on the works and concerns of the course. You are *not* expected to talk for a significant period during this discussion, not should you! This assignment is geared to help you learn how to lead a discussion of literature / culture and other topics, but the discussion itself is the important part.

For the discussion-question presentation: The grade for the presentation will be based equally on the summary of the questions and topics generated and on the presentation itself. The grade for the summary and topics will be based on the accuracy, detail, and insight of the summary, and the depth and clarity of the topics. A printed version of the summary and topics is to be submitted on the day of the presentation. The presentation portion of the grade will take into account the student's ability to lead and generate dynamic class discussion. A sign-in sheet for the presentation will be made available in the week of first week of class. **PLEASE NOTE**: if the course members are not particularly talkative, in some cases this may not reflect on you (and will in turn be reflected on their course participation grades). The instructor will do a "dry run" in the second week of course, as an example.

Note: you must do this assignment on a different week than your analytical presentation.

Analytical Presentation: This 15- to 20-minute presentation (approx. 8 to 10 pages, double spaced), following the style and format of a conference presentation, will consist of an analysis of one or more of the primary readings scheduled for the week of the presentation. You can analyse any aspect of the text, using whatever critical approach you think most appropriate and helpful. A formal written version of the analytical presentation must be submitted on the same day as the presentation. The written version and the presentation will each be worth half of the grade.

For the analytical presentations: The written version and the presentation will each be worth half of the grade. Both the presented and written versions will be graded according to the English Department's statement on Graduate Seminar Evaluation (see below), while the grade for the presented version will also take into account the student's ability to respond to questions and lead class discussion. A sign-in sheet for both presentations will be made available in the week of first week of class. The instructor will present one of his own papers in the second week of class, as an example of form.

Final Essay: The final essay will be 5000-6000 words (approximately 17 to 20 pages, double spaced), and can analyse any text or group of texts studied in the course. It can be based on your analytical presentation (though it will be expected that you take into account both class discussions and my

comments on your presentation, in addition to expanding it). This essay will be graded according to the English Department's statement on Graduate Seminar Evaluation (see below).

Note 1: All written work must be documented according to an accepted citation style (e.g. Chicago; MLA). Students must indicate to the professor which style they have chosen.

Note 2: all written assignments must be submitted electronically through Brightspace.

Class Discussion: This grade will be based on the quality and consistency of your participation in class discussions (with an emphasis on quality). Students will be expected to respond constructively and professionally to their colleagues' presentations, and to contribute to general class discussion of course material. Come prepared to discuss specifics about the material each week. See note below regarding FGS guidelines on the evaluation of participation.

Class Schedule

Introduction: Climate / Fiction

Sept. 6

Primary Reading: Miriam Oudin, "Edited Hansard 116"

Secondary Readings: Darko Suvin, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre"; Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, "Cli-fi: Birth of a Genre"; Mattias Hjerpe and Bjorn-Ola Linner, "Utopian and Dystopian Thought in Climate Change Science and Policy"

Cli-Fi Origins: Nature, Utopia, Apocalypse

Sept. 13

Primary Readings: Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* ("Economy" and "The Beanfield"); William Wordsworth, "Ode" ["Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood"]; Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (Chapters 13, 94-96)

Secondary Readings: Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (sel.)

Sept. 20

Primary: H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine*; E. M. Forster "The Machine Stops"

Secondary: H. G. Wells, "On Extinction"; Christina Alt, "Extinction, Extermination, and the Ecological Optimism of H.G. Wells"

Imagining a Global Climate: Energy Crises and Toxic Futures

Sept. 27

Primary: Frank Herbert, *Dune*

Secondary: Val Plumwood, "Nature in the Active Voice"; Brian Stableford, "Science Fiction and Ecology"

Oct. 4

Primary: *Mad Max: Fury Road* (screening can be arranged if class wishes); Paolo Bacigalupi, "The People of Sand and Slag"

Secondary: Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (sel. *)

Oct. 11

Primary: John Brunner, *Sheep Look Up*

Secondary: Lawrence Buell, "Toxic Discourse"; Global Humanitarian Forum, *Human Impact Report on Climate Change* (read "Executive summary, p. 1-4)

Presenting the Future

Oct. 18

Primary: Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl*

Secondary: Eric Otto, *Green Speculations: Science Fiction and Transformative Environmentalism* (sel.)

Oct. 25

Primary: Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*

Secondary: Kendra Strauss, "These Overheating Worlds"

Nov. 1

Primary: Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization*; Samuel R. Delany, "We, in Some Strange Power's Employ, Move on a Rigorous Line"

Secondary: E. Ann Kaplan, *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (sel.)

Nov. 6-10: Study Break

Nov. 15

Primary: Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

Secondary: Greta Gard, "From 'cli-fi' to Critical Ecofeminism: Narratives of Climate Change and Climate Justice"

Nov. 22

Primary Reading: China Miéville, *Three Moments of an Explosion*

Secondary: Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil* (sel.)

Looking Forward: Indigenizing Cli-Fi

Nov. 29

Primary: Richard Van Camp, "On the Wings of this Prayer"; Sherman Alexie, "Distances"; William Sanders, "When this World Is All on Fire"

Secondary: Conrad Scott, "(Indigenous) Place and Time as Formal Strategy: Healing Immanent Crisis in the Dystopias of Eden Robinson and Richard Van Camp"