

The Ecological in Post-WWII German Film

The subheading of a particularly compelling article by a consortium of European scholars stresses the need for “integrating the social sciences and humanities in global environmental change research.”¹ In seeking to redefine the human component of the “Anthropocene,” Palsson et al note that

When the general awareness of our ecological predicament started to emerge in the early twentieth century, the human sciences contributed significantly. However, in line with modernist theories about technology and progress, the [post-WWII] framing of the environment fatefully reduced it to an object of natural science. (p4)

The conceptions of the environment descended from the decades following WWII are doubtless significant parts of our contemporary predicament; however, there was much cultural theory from that period that may help to challenge those conceptions. These authors tacitly claim as much by calling on Hannah Arendt to hold that “because what currently counts as ‘environmental’ is also social [...] humanity’s knowledge enterprise needs to return its attention to social theory and the humanities” (p4).

In this course we will examine some of that pertinent texts of the “late modernist” period (ca. ’46-82² -- among others by Adorno, Arendt, Bateson, Dürrenmatt, Frisch, Jonas, and Sartre) in order to pose a question omitted in the above framing of the problem: what is the role of aesthetic works here? In particular, given the current prevalence of cognitive and visual cultural models, what are the potentials of visual works – still and moving – in this regard? After familiarizing ourselves with pertinent examples from the visual art tradition we will spread our attention across both mainstream features, documentary, and experimental films (by Lampert, Staudte, Resnais, Domnick, Vesely, Wolf, Kluge, Hein, Huillet/Straub, among other). What is held in the visual aesthetic field arising in the cultural landscape that had experienced the brunt of a lost war, seen the horrors of the holocaust and the results of atomic blasts, had begun to perceive the changes that post-war re-normalization would have on the environment, and was witnessing the rise of the televisual as a dominant cultural force? In the final section of the course we will move closer to the present to consider what our reevaluation of the post-WWII visual field offers us.

This course does not require knowledge of German or of film; both, however, could be useful. This course will cover some materials from the German MA list for “Film, Visual Art, and Performance,” and it will provide students with analytical tools for approaching the film in visual traditions more confidently. Students will prepare fully and participate actively, provide an oral report, and either write a seminar paper or a final project including a short annotated bibliography and take-home exam.

¹ Palsson, Gisli, et al, “Reconceptualizing the ‘Anthropos’ in the Anthropocene: Integrating the Social Sciences and Humanities in Global Environmental Change Research,” *Environmental Science & Policy* 28 (2013) 3–13.

² Larson Powell, *The Differentiation of Modernism: Postwar German Media Arts*, Rochester: Camden House, 2013.