

Spring 2018

ENG 818.002 | Studies in Genre and Media

Topic: “Substrates of Cinema: Infrastructure, Media, Logistics”

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Tuesday, 4:10-7pm



The Forgotten Space (2010), Allan Sekula and Noël Burch

This seminar explores what anthropologist and media historian Brian Larkin calls the “poetics and politics of infrastructure” through a range of films, videos, and art practices, from the late nineteenth century to the present. Both omnipresent and unseen, infrastructure has a way of receding from view until it fails, often catastrophically. Think of the BP’s Deepwater Horizon spill, the Dakota Access Pipeline stand-off, or even closer to home, the ongoing Flint water crisis. Globally, contemporary debates about the Anthropocene have brought into geological visibility the vast infrastructural project of modernity, one whose disastrous ecological implications, one would think, can no longer be refuted. But we now live in the Trump Era, where anything can be denied, and in the early days of an administration that came to power on the promise of linking a restrictive nationalist vision to promises of infrastructural renewal. Infrastructure, for ever-more-urgent reasons, continues to structure and demand our attention, our energies, and our resources, in every sense.

Infrastructure’s current return to visibility in political and civic life has produced a discernible *infrastructural turn* in arts and humanities scholarship over the last decade. “To be modern,” as historian of technology Paul Edwards once insisted, “is to live by means of infrastructures” — systems that link the various scales of time, space, and social organization, and thus form the socio-technical foundations of modernity itself. This renewed attention to the substrates of

modernities past and present is apparent in a range of disciplines and interdisciplinary formations, from film and media studies and theory, to art and architectural history, cultural studies, literary studies, urban studies, environmental studies, postcolonial studies, science and technology studies, the digital humanities, and their various intersections and overlaps.

This seminar aims to provide a broad introduction to the infrastructural turn in film and media studies, making visible the buried networks and systems that bring modern communities into being, inspire political activity and imagination, and organize bodies, labor, and commodities. Infrastructure has long been at the heart of debates about citizenship, democracy, and visions of a just public life. In this course, then, we will pay particular attention to the infrastructural dimensions of modern media, which function not just to transmit messages, but as what John Durham Peters calls “the fundamental constituents for organization.” This is what Peters and others have identified as the *logistical* dimension of media. World-enabling infrastructures, “media track and orient us in time and space, manage data and world, distribute and manage bodies and populations, and shift the basic conditions of culture and being.

Our goal will be to discuss how and why infrastructure has returned as a crucial critical problem in film and media studies, as well as for humanities scholars, for a range of artistic practices, and for contemporary civic and political life. We will pursue the *substrates* of cinema on two levels at once: we will explore infrastructure’s visibility in film and video (as representation, as documentation, as a formal and aesthetic matter); and we will think about film’s own infrastructures—the materialities, ontologies, resources, and modes of distribution that lay beneath film, and constitute the medium’s conditions of possibility. We will attempt to foster an infrastructural attentiveness to how and where media come from, what resources they consume and distribute, and how, elementally, they came to be what they are. Films and videos have been chosen for the range of infrastructural imaginaries and objects they take up.

Required Texts:

Armand Mattelart, *Networking the World, 1794-2000* (Minnesota)
Brian Larkin, *Signal & Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Duke)
Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (Verso)
Brian Klose, *The Container Principle: How a Box Changes the Way We Think* (MIT)
Tung Hui-hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (MIT)
Scott Anthony, *Night Mail* (BFI)

Electronic coursepack, posted on D2L

Recommended Texts:

Shannon Mattern, *Code + Clay...Data + Dirt: 5000 Years of Urban Media* (Minnesota)
Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (Verso)

Course Requirements:

1. Active and regular participation (20%)

2. Weekly discussion posts/questions and responses (20%)
3. Two conference-length papers (8-10 pages each, 20%, and 25%); or one 20-page seminar paper (45%)

Course Policies:

Attendance: You are allowed two absences over the course of the semester. You should reserve these for emergencies and serious illness. Every absence after your second will drop your final grade in the course 1/4 point. For example, four absences will drop a final grade of 3.5 to 3.0. I do not excuse absences. If you become seriously ill or the victim of emergency circumstances please notify me as soon as possible. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to get the notes from a classmate.

Laptops and Cell-phones: Laptops can only be used for taking notes and viewing readings electronically. I require you to close your laptops and refrain from using your phones during our discussions and screenings, as these technologies distract from the texts and films at hand. Turn off the ringer on your cell-phones before entering class. Texting is not allowed during class.

Recording: No photography or audio-visual recording of course content (slides, lectures, discussions, etc,) is allowed without advance written permission of the instructor. You should plan, then, to take written notes on lecture and discussion.

Tardiness: Tardiness is disruptive. A pattern of tardiness will affect your grade. I take attendance at the beginning of class; if you're not there when I call roll, it's your responsibility to set the record straight at the end of that class period. The relatively early hour of our class is no excuse for tardiness.

Participation: Participation is mandatory and crucial both to your success and to the overall strength of the course. I will do some lecturing to contextualize our material, but the majority of our class time will be discussion-based. Attendance does not count towards your participation grade. I expect you to come to class with thoughtful ideas, questions, and problems provoked by our readings. I do not expect you to "get" every reading the first time around, but I require that you try. We will talk more in class about how to make our discussion as dynamic and inclusive as possible. 20% of your grade will be determined by your active participation in class.

Papers: You will have the option of writing two conference-length papers (8 pages each) or one seminar-length paper (20 pages).

Late work: No late papers will be accepted. You have the schedule for assignments now, so plan ahead.

Plagiarism: Academic dishonesty is absolutely unacceptable. Any student found guilty of plagiarism on any assignment will fail the course immediately, no questions asked. I will also place a letter in the offending student's record in the dean's office. Two such letters will result in expulsion. We will talk about what constitutes plagiarism in class.

Decorum: I expect you to treat both your classmates and your professor with respect. This means listening attentively when someone else is speaking. If you are unable to stay awake and attentive in class, you will be counted absent. Whispering, interrupting, eye-rolling, eating, and the like are both rude and disruptive. If I find your classroom behavior disruptive, I will respectfully make you aware of

this. Any disruptions after the initial warning will seriously affect your grade, and you will be strongly encouraged to drop the class.

Office Hours: I encourage you to take advantage of my office hours to talk about your writing, the reading, or any other aspect of the course. My office hours for Spring 2018 are Fridays, 2-3pm and by appointment.

Screenings: You will screen the majority of our films on our Mediaspace channel. Copies of recommended films will be placed on reserve at the library.

Reading Schedule (subject to change):

Readings are to be completed before class on the assigned day. Papers will be collected at the beginning of class.

Week 1 | Infrastructuralisms | Poetics and Politics

January 9

Screening:

John Oliver, "Infrastructure"

Throwing Mail into Bags (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1901)

Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (Water Ruttman, 1927)

The Bridge (Joris Ivens, 1928)

The River (Pare Lorentz, 1938)

When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts, Act 1 (Spike Lee, 2007)

From Flint: Voices from a Poisoned City (Elise Conklin 2017)

Reading:

Adam Rothstein, "[How to See Infrastructure: A Guide for Seven Billion Primates](#)"

Paul Edwards, "Infrastructure and Modernity: Force, Time, and Social Organization in the History of Sociotechnical Systems" (185-210)

Brian Larkin, "The Poetics and Politics of Infrastructure"

Lisa Parks, "Stuff you Can Kick: Toward a Media Theory of Infrastructure"

Armand Mattelart, Ch. 1, "Networks of Universalization"

Week 2 | Media Infrastructures and Eco-Materialisms

January 16

Screening:

Playtime (Jacques Tati, 1967)

Topophilia (Peter Bo Rappmund, 2015)

Transformers: The Premake (Kevin Lee, 2014)

Reading:

André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image"

John Durham Peters, "Understanding Media" (from *The Marvelous Clouds*)

Jane Bennett, "The Force of Things"; "The Agency of Assemblages" (from *Vibrant Matter*)
Nadia Bozak, "Introduction: *The Cinematic Footprint*" (ebook)
Nicole Starosielski and Janet Walker, "Introduction: *Sustainable Media*" (ebook)

Recommended:

John Guillory, "The Genesis of the Media Concept"

Week 3 | Film, The Railroad, Modernity

January 23

Screening:

The Arrival of the Train at La Ciotat (Lumière, 1895)
Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show (Edwin Porter, 1902)
The Great Train Robbery (Edwin Porter, 1903)
The Lonedale Operator (D.W. Griffith, 1911)
The General (Buster Keaton, 1926)
The Phantom Operator (Caroline Martel, 2016)
RR (James Benning, 2007)

Recommended:

La Roue (Abel Gance, 1923)

Reading:

Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Chs. 2-4, 8-9, from *The Railway Journey* (ebook via MSU library)
Lynn Kirby, "Introduction" and Ch. 1, "Inventors and Hysterics," from *Parallel Tracks* (ebook)
Rebecca Solnit, "Lessons of the Golden Spike" (from *River of Shadows*)
Jo Anne Yates, "Introduction" pages 1-25, from *Control Through Communication*
Armand Mattelart, Chs. 2 and 3

Week 4 | The G.P.O., Griersonian Documentary, and Imperial Infrastructure

January 30

G.P.O. Film Unit Program

The Coming of the Dial (Legg and Moholy-Nagy, 1933)
Song of Ceylon (Wright, 1934)
A Colour Box (Lye, 1935)
Housing Problems (Elton and Anstey, 1935)
Night Mail (Wright and Watt, 1936)
The Fairy of the Phone (Coldstream, 1936)
N or NW (Lye, 1937)
Trade Tattoo (Lye, 1937)
We Live in Two Worlds (Cavalcanti, 1937)

Readings:

Sir. Stephen Tallents, "The Projection of Britain"

John Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary"

Scott Anthony, "A Triumph of Public Relations, 1933-1935"

Scott Anthony, *Night Mail* (BFI Film Classics)

Lee Grieveson, "Highways of Empire" (from *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations: Media, Capital, and the Liberal World System*)

Recommended:

Nicole Starosielski, "Against Flow" (from *The Undersea Network*)

Martin Stollery, "Receptions of Empire in 30s British Film Culture"

Week 5 | Infrastructure, Empire, and Colonial Rule

February 6th

Colonial Film Archive Program:

Black Cotton (1927)

Nigerian Cocoa Farmer (1948)

Nigeria's First Women Police (1955)

African Conference in London (1948)

Colonial Cinema Magazine No. 9 (1947)

Beer at its Best (1954)

Three Roads to Tomorrow (1958)

Giant in the Sun (1959)

Recommended:

The Bridge on the River Kwai (1957)

Reading:

Brian Larkin, "Signal and Noise: Introduction"; "Infrastructure, The Colonial Sublime, and Indirect Rule"; "Majigi, Colonial Film, State Publicity, and the Political Form of Cinema," "Conclusion"

Daniel Lerner, "Modernizing Styles of Life: A Theory," from *The Passing of Traditional Society*

Week 6 | Fordist/PostFordist Futures: Speculative Infrastructures | Guest Visitor: Julia

Yesbick

February 13

Screening:

The Road to Happiness (Ford Films 1924)

Wheels of Progress (US Dept. of Agriculture, 1927)

Master Hands (Jam Handy, 1936)

To New Horizons (Normal Bel Geddes, 1940)

Requiem (George Nelson and Len Gitelman, 1960)

Chevelle (Kevin Everson, 2011)
Regal Unlimited (Kevin Everson, 2015)
The Last Angel of History (John Akomfrah, 1996)
How to Rust (Julia Yesbick, 2016)

Recommended:

Jacques Tati, *Trafic* (1967)

Reading:

Lee Grieveson, "The Work of Film in the Age of Fordist Mechanization"
Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, "Record, Rhetoric, Rationalization: Industrial Organization and Film"
Haidee Wasson, "Cinema and Industrial Design: New Media Ecologies and the Exhibition Film"
George Nelson, "On Obsolescence"
Jonathan Sterne, "Out with the Trash: On the Future of New Media"
Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism"

Recommended:

Rick Prelinger, "Smoothing the Contours of Didacticism: Jam Handy and His Organization"

Week 7 | Noir Infrastructure

February 20

Screening:

Chinatown (Roman Polanski, 1974)
Los Angeles Plays Itself (Thom Andersen, 2003)
Water and Power (Pat O'Neill, 1989)

Recommended:

Detour (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945)
He Walked by Night (Alfred L. Werker, 1948)
Plunder Road (Hubert Cornfield, 1957)

Reading:

Mike Davis, "Sunshine or Noir"
Edward Dimendberg, "Introduction," "Centripetal Space" (from *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*)
Ulrich Beck, "Reflexive Modernization" and "The Problem of Risk," (from *Risk Society*)

Recommended:

Mark Shiel, "A Regional Geography of Film Noir: Urban Dystopias On- and Offscreen"

Week 8 | Petrocinemas | Guest Visitor: Brian Jacobson (U Toronto)

February 27

Screening:

The Song of Styrene (Alain Resnais, 1958)

La Via del Petrolio / The Road of Petroleum (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1967)

Red Desert (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1964)

The Shadow of Progress (BP Films, 1970)

Fifteen an Hour (Kevin Everson, 2011)

Half On, Half Off (Kevin Everson, 2011)

Black Sea Files (Ursula Biemann)

Reading:

Roland Barthes, "Plastics"

Edward Dimendberg, "'These are not Exercises in Style: *Le chant du Styrene*'"

Stephanie LeMenager, "Ultradeep: Petroleum Culture in the American Century," "The Aesthetics of Petroleum: after Oil!"

Brian Jacobson, "Big Oil's High-Risk Love Affair with Film"

Karl Schoonover, "Antonioni's Waste Management"

March 6-10 | MSU Spring Break

Week 9 | Logistical Media 1 | War, Vision, Machine

March 13

Screening:

Images of the World and the Inscription of War (Harun Farocki, 1989)

Eye/Machine I, II, and III (Harun Farocki, 2001-03)

Reading:

Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*

Nora Alter, "The Political Im/perceptible in the Essay Film: Farocki's "Images of the World and the Inscription of War"

Thomas Elsaesser, "The Future of 'Art' and 'Work' in the Age of Vision Machines: Harun Farocki"

Harun Farocki, "Phantom Images"

Week 10 | Logistical Media 2 | Containers, Ports, and Supply-Chain Cinema

March 20

Screening:

The Forgotten Space (Allan Sekula and Noël Burch)

Contained Mobility (Ursula Biemann)

The Packaging System (Rhodes Patterson)

Recommended:

Monsters, Inc. (Pete Docter, 2001)
Canal Zone (Frederick Wiseman)

Reading:

Alexander Klose, *The Container Principle*
Keller Easterling, "Introduction," and "The Zone" (from *Extrastatecraft*)
Keller Easterling, "The New Orgman: Logistics as an Organizing Principle of Contemporary Cities"
Deborah Cowan, (from *The Deadly Life of Logistics*)

Recommended:

Jesse LeCavalier, "Logistics: The First with the Most" (from *The Rule of Logistics*)
Jennifer Gabrys, "Shipping and Receiving: Circuits of Disposal and the Social Death of Electronics" (from *Digital Rubbish*)

Week 11 | Wire Aesthetics: Korea's IMF Cinema | Guest: Dr. Joseph Jeon (UC-Irvine)
March 27

Screening:

The Host (Bong Joon-ho, 2006)
Tube (Beek Woon-hak, 2003)

Recommended:

Speed (Jan de Bont, 1994)
The Taking of Pelham 1, 2, 3 (Joseph Sargeant, 1974)

Reading:

Joe Jeon, "Introduction: *Vicious Circuits*" (forthcoming from Stanford UP)
Joe Jeon, "Neoliberal Forms: CGI, Algorithm, and Hegemony in Korea's IMF Cinema"
Joe Jeon, "Wire Aesthetics: Tube Entertainment's Flops and Hegemonic Protocols"
Tung Hui-hu, *The Prehistory of the Cloud* (Chapters 1 and 2)

Recommended:

John Harwood, "On Wires: Or, Metals and Modernity, Reconsidered"

***Week 12| Information Infrastructures and Network Aesthetics**
April 3

Screening:

A Communications Primer (Charles and Ray Eames, 1953)
Introduction to Feedback (Charles and Ray Eames, 1958)
Inflatables Illustrated (Ant Farm, 1971)
World's Longest Bridge (Ant Farm, 1970)
Media Burn (Ant Farm, 1975)

Syriana (Stephen Gaghan, 2005)

Recommended:

The Matrix (Wachowskis, 1995)

Reading:

Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies"

Mark Wigley, "Network Fever"

Patricia Mellencamp, "Video and the Counter Culture"

Felicity Scott, "Truckstop Network Dossier," and "Projects for a New Mobility"

Hans Magnus Enzenberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media"

Patrick Jagoda, "Introduction: Network Aesthetics," "Emergent Aesthetics: Network Films"

Recommended:

Keller Easterling, "Broadband"

Christian Sandvig, "The Internet as Infrastructure"

Week 13 | The Deep Time of Media Infrastructures | Guest: Dr. Shannon Mattern (The New School)

April 10

Screening:

Dawson City: Frozen Time (Bill Morrison 2017)

Reading:

Jussi Parikka, "Materiality: Grounds of Media and Culture," from *The Geology of Media*

Shannon Mattern, *Code and Clay, Data and Dirt* (excerpts)

Shannon Mattern, "The Big Data of Ice, Rocks, Soils, and Sediments"

Shannon Mattern, "Extract and Preserve: Underground Repositories for a Posthuman Future"

Recommended:

Jamie Baron, "History, the Archive, and the Appropriation of the Indexical Document" (from *The Archive Effect*)

Brian Murphy, "Bomb-Proofing the Digital Image: An Archaeology of Media Preservation Infrastructure"

Week 14 | Film and the Anthropocene: Cinema's Inhospitable World | Guest: Dr. Jennifer Fay (Vanderbilt University)

April 17

Screening:

Still Life (Jia Zhang-ke, 2006)

Manufactured Landscapes (Jennifer Baichwal, 2007)

Reading:

Paul Crutzen, et al, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overrunning the Great Forces of Nature"

Bruno Latour, "Agency in the Time of the Anthropocene"

Akbar Abbas, "Poor Theory"

Jennifer Fay, "Introduction" and "Still Life," from *Inhospitable Worlds: Cinema in the Age of the Anthropocene*

Nadia Bozak, "Extraction," from *The Cinematic Footprint* (ebook)

Week 15 | Smart Homes, Smart Cities: On the Scales of Domestic Infrastructure

April 27

Screening:

Leave it to Roll-Oh (Jam Handy, 1940)

S-73 (Charles and Ray Eames, 1954)

House: After Five Years of Living (Charles and Ray Eames, 1955)

In Order Not To Be Here (Deborah Stratman, 2002)

Panic Room (David Fincher, 2002)

Cities of the Future: Songdo, South Korea (Cisco, 2015)

Reading:

Charles Eames, Buckminster Fuller, and Herbert Matter, "What is a House?"

Mark Wigley, "Planetary Homeboy"

Adam Greenfield, "The Internet of Things: A Planetary Mesh of Perception and Response"

Davin Heckman, from *A Small World: Smart Houses and the Dream of the Perfect Day*

Lynn Spigel, "Object Lessons for the Media Home: From Storagewall to Invisible Design"

Orit Halpern, Robert Mitchell, and Bernard Dionysus Geoghegan, "The Smartness Mandate: Notes toward a Critique"

Recommended:

Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (on mobile privatization)

