

OIL

“That apple you’re eating. The milk you drank at lunch. Every little thing you touch, even just to lift it into your mouth. It’s there. It rubs off. Think about that.”

Warren Cariou, “Tarhands: A Messy Manifesto”

ENVS 411: Cultures of Oil, Cultures of Climate Change
Fall 2015
Taylor McHolm
CRN 12207
TR 2:00 – 3:50 PM

Imagination has material consequences. The root causes of climate change derive from a set of cultural values and understandings. These values and understandings are produced and reproduced, in part, by the tremendous capacity of petroleum. Oil’s undeniable power has not only made possible most of the elements of mainstream American and, in many cases, global culture, it has produced the conditions of anthropogenic climate change. But how do we see petroleum? How do we *experience* climate change? The hard sciences have contributed invaluable data and resources to help us understand these processes, but is this the same thing as “knowing” them? As experiencing them? Can we expect a solution from the same ways of thinking and acting that have produced the problem in the first place? To answer these questions, we must turn to an understanding of culture.

This course investigates the cultural values, representations, understandings and material manifestations of oil and climate change. Throughout this course, we will take a multi-disciplinary approach to consider what the humanities can add to the important conversations about understanding climate change and the culture of oil that has produced it. We will begin our course with an overview of the processes of climate change and oil’s role in those processes. From this foundation, we will begin to explore how the arts and culture have produced, and then responded to, a culture made possible by cheap and available oil. Throughout the course, we’ll be looking at the various ways that literature (including novels, graphic novels, poetry and short stories), visual media (including photography, film, sculpture and activist art) and even video games have been enabled by and respond to oil. Then, we’ll spend the final portion of the course investigating the ways these same media have begun to address anthropogenic climate change.