Reading for the World: System, Resource, Text
Convenor: Dr Claire Westall (English)
MA Option Module Spring 2021

This energetic MA Module addresses contemporary debates about resources and energy through a world-literary and world-ecological lens. It will introduce students to an understanding of the world-literary system, and the intellectual and theoretical developments necessary to think in ‘worlded’ terms, especially about ecological and economic issues. More exactly, it will introduce students to resource and energy related prose, often fiction, as well as other cultural texts (e.g. graphic novels, documentaries, blockbuster films), and use these materials to reconfigure debates about postcoloniality, globalization and the capitalist world-system. It will also help students to analyse different forms of human and non-human energy, and to consider their interactions. It will encourage students to think across geographic boundaries and through relational inequalities by concentrating on depictions of energy resources and energy expenditure, moving from the human body out into the world-system. Topics will include a range from the following: land and labour; food and bio-politics; coal and collapse; iron men; oil; water; and electricity. Attention will also be paid to shifts in energy paradigms and, at the human level, labouring, sporting and suffering bodies. This module will appeal to students interested in world literature, literature’s relationship to politics, and contemporary eco-criticism as it moves to consider the world-ecological dimensions of energy management. This will enable students to develop new ways of approaching comparative literary studies and to get to grips with new developments in what is called the Energy Humanities.

Module aims
The primary module aim is to introduce students to the new intellectual developments within the energy humanities, world-ecology and world-literature, by exploring resource and energy related prose, often fiction, as well as other cultural texts (e.g. graphic novels, documentaries, blockbuster films), and using these materials to reconfigure debates about postcoloniality, globalization and the capitalist world-system.

Module learning outcomes
On successful completion of the module students should be able to demonstrate:

1. an understanding of new intellectual areas of debate related to resource and energy cultures;
2. an appreciate of the theoretical and literary debates underpinning ideas of world-literature, the world-literary system and world-ecology;
3. an advanced and complex understanding of how specific resources and energy systems appear within literary and other cultural texts;
4. a sophisticated critical view of how and why “worlded” approaches to comparative literature, world-ecology and resource/energy management function;
5. an ability to critically analyse and debate challenging primary texts and theoretical sources, in class and in writing, and their explores of specific resource cultures and energy systems;
6. a capacity to carry out independent research that engages with the key themes and contexts of the module.

Background reading
Before the module begins you might want to do some reading to ground yourself in the terms of debate contextualising the module and these “background” readings will underpin the module’s theoretical approach and the opening discussion in the first seminar.


Indicative weekly topics and texts
Sweetness & Light – theorical debates plus sugar poetry and stories
Sugar & Sleep: The Farming of Bones (1998) by Edwidge Danticat
Bananas & (Bio)Politics – Banana stories & extracts
Iron Men – The Iron Man (1968) by Ted Hughes
Coal & Collapse – GB84 (2004) by David Peace
Oil/Water – Helon Habila, Oil on Water (2011); Steve Dunn & Sharon Wheeler, Oil & Water (2011)
Electricity & Excess – Electricity (2006) by Ray Robinson
Inter-galactic Energies – Tau Zero (1970 [1967]) by Poul Anderson
Indicative documentaries & films

*That Sugar Film* (Damon Gameau, Australia, 2014)
*The Price of Sugar*, (dir. Bill Haney, Dominican Republic/USA, 2007)
*The Secrets of Sugar* (Ronna Syed & Allya Davidson, 2013)
*Life & Debt* (dir Stephanie Black, UK, 2003)
*The Iron Giant* (dir. Brad Bird 1999)
*Iron Man* (dir John Favreau, 2008), plus *Iron Man 2* and *Iron Man 3*
*Living is Winning* (dir. Linda Burns 2008)
*The Battle of Orgreave* (dir Jeremy Deller 2001)
*The Price of Coal* (dir Ken Loach, 1977)
*Lessons From Darkness*, (Germany/Kuwait, dir. Werner Herzog, 1992)
*A Crude Awakening: The Oil Crash* (Ray McCormack, Switzerland, 2006)
*Electricity* (dir Bryn Huggens, UK, 2014)
*The Selfish Giant* (dir Clio Bernard, UK, 2013)