

The Cultural History of Weather in the United States

Roger Turner

In this seminar for advanced undergraduates, we'll explore how Americans have understood and responded to the atmosphere that surrounds them. Changing technologies have made different aspects of the weather salient or dangerous, while also beginning to affect the dynamics of the climate itself. Using perspectives from cultural studies, history, and STS, the course will look at responses to disasters like the Dust Bowl and Hurricane Katrina, as well as political arguments over how to react to climate change. Weekly short essays will help students develop their expository writing skills in this course built around regular participation and discussion.

Readings to Purchase

- Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: Anatomy of a Social Disaster*
- William Meyer, *Americans and their Weather* (Oxford UP, 2000)
- Mark Monmonier, *Air Apparent: How Meteorologists Learned to Map, Predict, and Dramatize Weather*
- Theodore Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (Oxford University Press, 2000)
- Spencer Weart, *The Discovery of Global Warming* (Harvard UP)
- Donald Worster, *The Dustbowl: The Great Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford UP)
- A Course Packet of articles and book chapters

Assessment

- 1) Participation and attendance is mandatory, and will make up an important part of your grade.
- 2) Throughout the semester, you will keep a weather diary, noting each day's conditions, and how you and people around respond to these changes.
- 3) Each week, at the start of class I will collect a one-page response paper, where you will address a part of the reading that was particularly interesting, important, or impressive to you.
- 4) A final paper where you compare a recent popular history of meteorological disaster to a fictional one, from a film, novel or play. You should pick a theme that offers a rich comparison between the two works, such as human mastery over nature, the role of social structure in the result, the hubris or humility of science, or who is responsible for the disaster. Among the works you might compare are:

Popular Disaster Books	Disaster Fiction
<i>Rising Tide</i> , John Barry	Twister (1996 film)
<i>The Perfect Storm</i> , Sebastian Junger	The Day After Tomorrow (2004 film)
<i>The Worst Hard Time</i> , Timothy Egan	<i>Storm</i> (George Stewart, 1941)
<i>Isaac's Storm</i> , Eric Larson	<i>Grapes of Wrath</i> (John Steinbeck, 1939)
Hemingway's Hurricane, Phil Scott	<i>The Rainmaker</i> (1956 film)

Schedule and Readings

Week 1: Why the weather? Using Weather to understand American Culture

Week 2: Surveying the Development of America's Weather Cultures, European Settlement to the Civil War

Meyer, *Americans and their Weather*, pp 3-90

Fleming, *Meteorology in America*, pp 1-74.

Week 3: Healthy and unhealthy airs in the 19th Century

Gregg Mitman and Ronald L. Numbers. "From Miasma to Asthma: The Changing Fortunes of Medical Geography in America." *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 25 (2003): 391-412.

Conevery Bolton Valencius, "Introduction" and "Air," in *The Health of the Country* (Basic Books, 2002): 1-14; 109-132.

Selections from Charles Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years* (Course Pack)

Week 4. Surveying the Development of America's Weather Cultures, Civil War to the present

Meyer, *Americans and their Weather*, pp. 91-214

Fleming, "Storms, Strikes and Surveillance" (Course Pack)

Week 5. Causes of Climatic Catastrophe: Investigating the Dustbowl

Worster, *The Dustbowl* (Whole Book)

Week 6. Focus: Weather and the Built Environment

Selections from John Stilgoe on vernacular housing (Course Pack)

Raymond Arsenault, "The End of the Long Hot Summer: The Air Conditioner and Southern Culture," in *Searching for the Sunbelt: Historical Perspectives on a Region* (pp. 176-211). (Course Pack)

Selections from Adam Rome, *Bulldozer in the countryside* (Course Pack)

Week 7. Healthy and unhealthy air in contemporary America

Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: Anatomy of a Social Disaster*

Monmonier, *Air Apparent*, Ch. 6, "Downwind Dangers"

Week 8. Simulating the Weather

Vladimir K. Zworykin, "Outline of Weather Proposal, 1945," download at: <http://www.meteohistory.org/2008historyofmeteorology4/>

Monmonier, *Air Apparent*, Ch. 5, "Looking Ahead"

Weart, *Discovery of Global Warming*, Chapter 4.

Week 9. The Sociopolitical challenges of Engineering the Weather

Steinberg, "Cloud Busting in Fulton County" (Course Pack)

James Fleming, "The Climate Engineers," *Wilson Quarterly* (Spring 2007).
(Available online)

Week 10. Depicting the Weather on Television

Monmonier, *Air Apparent*, Ch. 10, "Weather Channels and Websites"

Kris M. Wilson, "Television Weathercasters as Prominent Science Communicators." *Public Understanding of Science*, v. 17, n.1, p. 73-87. 2008.

Mergen, "Managing the Weather," in *Weather Matters* (Course Pack)

Week 11. Making sense of modern Weather disasters

Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*

Week 12. Understanding Katrina

We'll read five or so of the many scholarly essays compiled by the Social Science Research Council as part of the "Understanding Katrina" project. Available free on the web at: <http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/>

Week 13. Climate Change and the Politics of Science

Chris Mooney, "Blinded By Science: How 'Balanced' Coverage Lets the Scientific Fringe Hijack Reality," *Columbia Journalism Rev.* Article (online at <http://cjrarchives.org/issues/2004/6/mooney-science.asp>)

Conway and Oreskes, "Challenging Knowledge: How Climate Science Became a Victim of the Cold War," in *Agnotology: The making and unmaking of ignorance* (Course Pack)

Selections from Weart

John Coleman, "The Amazing Story Behind the Global Warming Scam," <http://www.kusi.com/weather/colemanscorner/38574742.html>

Week 14. Playing Weather Experts: Representations of Meteorologists in Popular Culture

[Final paper due; No reading assigned: I'll do the advance work, you bring the discussion.]

This discussion will be built around cartoons and film clips of meteorologists in the 20th century, from sources like *Let's get married* (1937), the Beverly Hillbillies (1964), *The Unchained Goddess* (1957), *The Day after tomorrow*, *Twister*, and Cap'n Sandy the weatherman from a Savannah, Georgia TV station, 1962.