

Nature and Virtuality in Novels and Films

English 2220, Spring 2012, 3 Credit Hours
Fulfills Humanities Exploration

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In this class we will explore various films, short stories and novels that wrestle with the problem of the virtual and its relationship with nature. Although today the virtual is typically associated with cyberspace, digital media, and video games, the virtual has always been with us in art, memory, dream, fantasy, and in representation generally-speaking. Where Plato condemned art as counterfeit reality in *The Republic*, Oscar Wilde in contrast disdained nature as merely “bad art” and instead valorized the artificial. Films like *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix* lay bare the anxieties that result from the threat of lifelike simulations ultimately substituting for the so-called “natural” world. In William Gibson’s cyberpunk technoscapes and the transhumanist vision of Ray Kurzweil, virtuality becomes so pervasive that nature in effect disappears: prosthetic limbs and circuitry fuse technology with the body and the allure of cyberspace substitutes for physical landscapes and fleshly interaction.

In response to the “threat of the virtual,” texts like E.M. Forster’s 1909 story “The Machine Stops” and the film *WALL-E* represent the attempted flight away from mechanized society back into the “natural” body. But Werner Herzog’s film *Grizzly Man* viscerally illustrates just how deadly a re-encounter with the body and wild nature can be for people who are used to living their lives through digital media. In a fascinating irony, James Cameron’s film *Avatar* likewise returns humans to an intimate and sensuous relationship with nature, but only through the intercession of a digitally-linked avatar body. Cameron moreover represents nature entirely through computer-generated imagery, a cybernetic Eden of his own creation. What is it we truly want—a return to nature? Or a high-definition simulation of nature?

In addition to these works we will also read Oscar Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Philip K. Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, and Adolfo Bioy Casares’ novella *The Invention of Morel*. These and short works by authors including Edward Abbey, Ray Bradbury, Jorge Borges, Jean Baudrillard, Marshall McLuhan, and Susan Sontag should make for intense and lively discussions on a critical and timely subject.

