VIRTUALITY AND NATURE

VIRTUALITY AND NATURE — Dr. Alf Seegert

I'm teaching two versions of this course in Fall 2013:

- **English 2220, Novels and Films: Virtuality and Nature** (T,H 10:45-12:05) — Fulfills Humanities Exploration requirement (HF). No pre-requisites required.
- **English 5050, Studies in Genre: Virtuality and Nature** (T,H 3:40-5:00) — meets with HUM 6900. Prerequisite: ENGL 2600.

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. Such debates continue today. 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 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" represent the attempted flight away from mechanized society back into the "natural" body. Alex Rivera's surrealist science fiction film *Sleep Dealer* examines the alienating effects of avatar identity and drone technology. 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 addition to these works we will also watch episodes from *Black Mirror* — Charlie Brooker's darkly satiric British series on technology-as-*Twilight Zone*.

Other texts include Oscar Wilde's novel of avatar identity, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (the basis for *Blade Runner)*, and Adolfo Bioy Casares' novella *The Invention of Morel*, plus short works by Edward Abbey, Ray Bradbury, Jorge Borges, Jean Baudrillard, Marshall McLuhan, Susan Sontag, and others.