

070.224 – Plastic

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Department of Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University
Fall 2015, Fridays 1:30-3:50 PM, 186 Gilman Hall

“Plastic...is in essence the stuff of alchemy,” the French literary critic Roland Barthes famously wrote in 1957—“more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation.” The synthetic inventions of the 20th century that we call “plastic” are now ubiquitous on Earth, from the heart of modern cities to the most distant oceans. The word *plastic* refers, etymologically, to that which can be formed or molded. This idea of transformation concerns not only these material artifacts, bags and bottles and so on, but also the human beings that they have been formed and molded for—their promise of radically remaking our lives as well. In this course, we will think between plastic things and the plasticity or malleability of human nature. We will work with writings in history, anthropology, fiction, poetry, and philosophy; films, comic books, activist and art works; and our own experience with plastic artifacts of various kinds. Our goal is to think through the deep intertwining of hopeful dreams and fearsome nightmares that shape the experience of plastic in modern times.

Materials – Most of the required books are available at the campus bookstore; some of them have more unconventional distribution but are available online. The remainder of course readings will be made available to you electronically on the Blackboard site for the course. You will also need a dedicated notebook for field observations, apart from wherever you take your class notes.

Requirements (and % of overall grade) – The class will be taught as a seminar; attendance at all class sessions is required, as is active participation in discussion (10%). By midnight each Thursday, you will post a brief (2-3 sentence) reaction to the week’s reading on Blackboard, broaching a topic for discussion (10%). Throughout the semester, you will keep a field journal with narrative entries (at least two per week) that document your own observations regarding experiences of plastic in local life (20%). Working in pairs over the course of the semester, and with all due respect for the privacy, safety, and well-being of others, you will try out a small “happening” of some kind (i.e. try out something unexpected) with regard to our habits and customs with plastic, and report in class on what happened (10%). Finally, you will develop an independent project of your own on a topic of your choice, due in stages in the form of a paragraph proposal (10%), a bibliography of relevant work (10%), and a final product (30%) that may take the form of a written paper (10-12 pages 1.5 spaced) or some other medium of expression to be developed in consultation with me. At the beginning of the semester, you will be required to complete a short online course for responsible research with human subjects.

Resources – There are a number of organizations and websites to consult with regard to your independent projects. On the modern history of plastics and plastic objects, see the Chemical Heritage Foundation (chemheritage.org), the Museum of Design in Plastics (modip.ac.uk), the Plastics Collection at Syracuse University (plastics.syr.edu), and the Plastics Historical Society (plasticquarian.com). For the plastics industry, see the Plastics Division of the American Chemistry Council (plastics.americanchemistry.com), the Plastics Industry Trade Association (plasticsindustry.org), and Plastics News (plasticsnews.com). For environmentalists on plastic pollution, see Algalita Marine Research and Education (algalita.org), the Plastic Pollution Coalition (plasticpollutioncoalition.org), and My Plastic Free Life (myplasticfreelife.com). Closer to home, the Baltimore Museum of Industry (thebmi.org) is a wonderful resource on the history of local manufacturing, and Trash Free Maryland (trashfreemaryland.org) has been working for awareness and legislation regarding plastic debris in the Chesapeake Bay. For relevant anthropological works, see the AnthroSource database via the library.

Policies – (1) *Email*. You will receive periodic notices and instructions concerning coursework on your JHU email account; you are responsible for ensuring receipt of these messages.

(2) *Attendance*. Unexcused absences from class will compromise your grade, so please ensure that your name is recorded during each session on the class attendance sheet.

(3) *Electronic devices*. Use of such devices is distracting and disallowed during class sessions. If this expectation will pose any significant problems for you, please talk to me about this individually.

¹ Office hours Tuesdays 1:30-3:30 PM, Macaulay 111 / pandian@jhu.edu

(4) *Disability*. Any student with a disability who may need accommodations in this class should obtain an accommodation letter from Student Disability Services.

(5) *Assignments*. Late assignments will be marked down 10% per day.

(6) *Academic integrity*. The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. Ethical violations include cheating on exams, plagiarism, reuse of assignments, improper use of the Internet and electronic devices, unauthorized collaboration, alteration of graded assignments, forgery and falsification, lying, facilitating academic dishonesty, and unfair competition.

Schedule

August 28	Introduction <i>Plastic Bag</i> (dir. Ramin Bahrani, 2009)
September 4	Jeffrey Meikle, <i>American Plastic: A Cultural History</i> (Rutgers, 1995), 1-124 <i>Song of Styrene</i> (dir. Alain Resnais, 1958)
September 11	Jeffrey Meikle, <i>American Plastic: A Cultural History</i> , 183-302 <i>Due: CITI Classroom Protocol Certificate for human subjects research</i>
September 18	<i>Plastic Planet</i> (dir. Werner Boote, 2010) Marina Zurkow, <i>The Petroleum Manga</i> (Punctum, 2014) (begin reading) <i>Due: Paragraph proposals by email</i>
September 25	Marina Zurkow, <i>The Petroleum Manga</i> <i>Due: Field journals (for 5% of grade)</i>
October 2	Julie Decker, <i>Gyre: The Plastic Ocean</i> (Booth-Clibborn, 2014)
October 9	H.G. Wells, "The Limits of Individual Plasticity," 1895 H.G. Wells, <i>The Island of Dr. Moreau</i> , 1896
October 23	William James, "Habit," from <i>Principles of Psychology</i> , 104-127 Catherine Malabou, <i>What Should We Do With Our Brain?</i> (Fordham, 2008) <i>Due: Project bibliographies by email</i>
October 30	Davi Kopenawa, <i>The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman</i> (Belknap, 2013), selections <i>Due: Field journals (for 5% of grade)</i>
November 6	Art Spiegelman, <i>Jack Cole and Plastic Man: Forms Stretched to Their Limits</i> (Chronicle Books, 2001; out of print but available second-hand)
November 13	Alexander Edmonds, <i>Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex and Plastic Surgery in Brazil</i> (Duke, 2010), selections
November 20	Ron Kolm, "The Plastic Factory" (Autonomea, 2011) Jody Roberts, "Reflections of an Unrepentant Plastiphobe: An Essay on Plasticity and the STS Life" in <i>Accumulation: The Material Politics of Plastic Safe</i> (dir. Todd Haynes, 1995)
December 4	Evelyn Reilly, <i>Styrofoam</i> (Roof Books, 2009) <i>Due: Field journals (for 10% of grade)</i>
December 14	<i>Due: Final projects by 4pm in my mailbox in Macaulay 404</i>