

Television in/of the banal Anthropocene: Introduction

JULIA LEYDA AND DIANE NEGRA

Climate change occupies a recurring place in news headlines and provides the premise for an array of disaster and extreme weather films; numerous studies in broadcast news, print and online media, fiction film and television have taken up the significance of climate change and extreme weather. The continued relevance of this impulse in new research is undeniable, as global temperature records continue to be broken and extreme weather becomes normalized in the global North (as it has been for longer in other regions). As we have argued elsewhere, only changes in quotidian experience – the growing frequency of extreme weather events and their increasing prominence in the North American media – will effectively foster a wider public recognition of climate change in the USA that is more in line with the rest of the developed world.¹ This recognition, as Americans and Europeans are forced to cope with the discomforts and dangers of extended heatwaves, floods, landslides, hurricanes and superstorms, has slowly become manifest in public opinion polls. Between 2014 and 2019, the number of Americans who described their attitude towards climate change as ‘alarmed’ (the most concerned of six categories in the surveys) more than tripled, and a majority believed climate change was to some degree fuelling extreme weather.² Similar attitudinal shifts are occurring in the UK as more people experience extreme weather first-hand.³ In this sense, as a result of a ‘new normal’ baseline experience of anthropogenic

- 1 Julia Leyda and Diane Negra, ‘Introduction: extreme weather and global media’, in Julia Leyda and Diane Negra (eds), *Extreme Weather and Global Media* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1–28.
- 2 Matthew Goldberg, Abel Gustafson, Seth Rosenthal, John Kotcher, Edward Maibach and Anthony Leiserowitz, ‘For the first time, the Alarmed are now the largest of Global Warming’s Six Americas’, *Yale Program on Climate Change Communication*, 16 January 2020; Fred Backus, ‘Most Americans think climate change contributes to extreme weather events’, *CBS News*, 15 September 2019.
- 3 Christina Demski, Stuart Capstick, Nick Pidgeon, Robert Gennaro Sposato and Alexa Spence, ‘Experience of extreme weather affects climate change mitigation and adaptation responses’, *Climatic Change*, vol. 140, no. 2, pp. 149–64.

climate change, extreme weather is becoming more and more banal, a part of everyday life for growing numbers of people.

One of the drivers behind this shift in public attitudes, and one area in which it may be discerned, is popular culture and its dialectical relation to society. Here we play upon the meanings of the term ‘banal’, which also refers to the often delegitimated status of television in hierarchies of taste and culture.⁴ We particularly have in mind the ways in which climate change information (both accurate and inaccurate) is communicated through generic formulae and tabloidized forms in ways that confer upon it a passive familiarity. As television audiences are inundated with increasingly banal news about extreme weather and climate change, their viewing position is subtly altered. Drawing on Fredric Jameson’s concept of the political unconscious and Lawrence Buell’s later formulation of the environmental unconscious,⁵ we suggest that it is possible, and indeed necessary, to note the presence of a climate unconscious in places where it is usually elided or occluded.⁶ The cultural pervasiveness of the concept of climate change is built into the current moment in the Anthropocene, and as the new disciplinary field of energy humanities argues, this is true even (or especially) when so many of us enjoy the ‘unseen privilege of taking energy for granted’.⁷ For this reason it manifests in popular culture in sometimes surprising and banal ways. The contributors to this dossier collectively pose the argument that there exists a need for more and better comprehensive theories of a ‘climate unconscious’ in the scholarship on contemporary popular television, and accordingly we turn to the question of how television entertainment engages, or resists engaging, with Anthropocene conditions.

Groundbreaking researchers in the energy humanities have pointed out the need to consider, for example, the centrality of oil to US culture, producing exciting analysis of television series such as *Dallas* (1978–91) and films such as *There Will be Blood* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2007).⁸ Our dossier expands the purview of these analyses by uncovering the climate unconscious nestled into taken-for-granted, everyday TV formats such as the lifestyle show and the prestige drama, examining the ways in which they fail ‘to reckon with how nearly every aspect of what passes for modern life is premised upon access to cheap and easy energy’.⁹ Anthropologist Heather Anne Swanson coins this key concept in her blog post ‘On the banality of the Anthropocene’, in which she describes what goes unseen:

When my uncle, a farmer in northeast Iowa, gazes out at his cornfields, he does not see the annihilation of the prairie, the loss of the bison, or the displacement of American Indian communities. He does not notice the contamination of the groundwater, even though he had to re-dig his well a few years ago due to bacterial seepage from a nearby pig farm.¹⁰

She argues further that ‘white middle-class American subjectivities are predicated on not noticing’ structural environmental circumstances,

4 Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).

5 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981). Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture and Environment in the US and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

6 Julia Leyda, Kathleen Look, Alexander Starre, Thiago Pinto Barbosa and Manuel Rivera, ‘The dystopian impulse of contemporary cli-fi’, Working Paper of the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies, Potsdam, December 2016.

7 Jennifer Wenzel, ‘Introduction’, in Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel and Patricia Yeager (eds), *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2017), pp. 1–16.

8 See, for example, Matthew Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom and the Forces of Capital* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014).

9 Wenzel, ‘Introduction’, p. 12.

10 Heather Anne Swanson, ‘The banality of the Anthropocene’, *Society for Cultural Anthropology*, 22 February 2017, <<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/the-banality-of-the-anthropocene>> accessed 19 December 2020.

- 11 Helen Whale and Franklin Ginn, 'In the absence of sparrows', in Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landmann (eds), *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), pp. 92–116.
- 12 Andrew S. Mathews, 'Ghostly forms and forest histories', in Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt (eds), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. G154–56.
- 13 Richard Grusin, 'Introduction. Anthropocene feminism: an experiment in collaborative theorizing', in Grusin (ed.), *Anthropocene Feminism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. vii–xix, viii.
- 14 See Michael Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012).

surrounded as they are by banal, seemingly placid, 'natural' surroundings where human intervention in the landscape is taken for granted and made almost invisible. In a European context, too, the changes accompanying the Anthropocene era, including extinctions, altered relations between human and animal, and experiences of 'nature', can go unnoticed precisely because they occur gradually and are often signalled by absences rather than noticeable presences. Helen Whale and Franklin Ginn research local perceptions of, and grief over, the near total absence of formerly omnipresent house sparrows in London,¹¹ while Andrew S. Mathews articulates a similar critical method of consciously noticing 'the ghostly forms that have emerged from past encounters between people, plants, animals, and soils' in the forests around Lucca, Italy.¹² In bringing this type of inquiry to screen studies, our central question concerns how an attention to the banal Anthropocene – foregrounding absences in everyday, taken-for-granted cultural forms – might foster new ways of viewing and theorizing contemporary television.

Richard Grusin observes that 'the idea of the Anthropocene has caught fire in the imagination of artists, humanists, and social scientists, for whom it has provided a powerful framework through which to account for and depict the impact of climate change in a variety of media forms and practice'.¹³ Television, of course, is no exception. As a historically domestic, quotidian and artistically taken-for-granted medium, television is particularly well positioned to operate as a heuristic in gauging cultural perceptions of climate change. Long denigrated simply as banal pabulum for the masses, it has often served as a scapegoat for all that is wrong with popular culture.¹⁴ Several shifts in marketing and distribution, however, suggest that national contexts for television matter differently today. First, with the advent of global streaming platforms and their frequent recourse to nation-branding via marketing locations and settings as part of a given show's appeal, the assumption no longer holds that a particular 'nationality' also demarcates audience limits for television programmes. Furthermore, given its recent association with a heightened cultural esteem and shifts to complex, serial storytelling, trenchant characterization and structural experimentation under the rubric and branding strategy of 'quality TV', it might seem likely that internationally acclaimed prestige dramas with global fandoms would be the televisual form most likely to engage with the experiences and concerns of the Anthropocene. The contributions to this dossier, however, test that assumption. Included among the set of texts analysed here are examples of middle-brow food television and lifestyle series that are situated decidedly apart from quality forms, of which we also include case studies. The dossier essays provide close readings of specific television series that can be placed along a spectrum from critical successes to everyday entertainment. In line with Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell, we believe that 'there is a crucial role for television scholars to use our expertise about the medium's history aesthetics, structures and cultural importance to provide critical analyses of specific

15 Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (eds), *How to Watch Television* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013), p. 4.

16 Brian R. Jacobson, 'The Shadow of Progress and the cultural markers of the Anthropocene', *Environmental History*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2019), pp. 158–72.

17 Ailise Bulfin, 'Popular culture and the "new human condition": catastrophe narratives and climate change', *Global and Planetary Change*, no. 156 (2017), pp. 140–46.

18 Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), p. 48.

19 Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

20 Despite the book's trenchant analysis, this characterization would apply, for instance, to Jennifer Fay's *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

programs'.¹⁵ In addition to selecting from various genres and platforms, our dossier aims to illuminate the ways in which television speaks to/of the Anthropocene and its surging position as a subject of public concern.

Pushing beyond textual analysis examining overt thematics and representations of climate change, we consider some of the more subtle instances of what Brian Jacobson calls 'cultural markers of the Anthropocene'.¹⁶ As Ailise Bulfin points out, a cultural studies approach that attends to popular culture's unique barometer of below-the-radar structures of feeling can yield productive close readings and draw connections across various experiences of everyday life that can help us better understand life in the banal Anthropocene.¹⁷ At a moment when global climate strikes and non-violent direct action campaigns such as those undertaken by Extinction Rebellion feature in headlines and water-cooler chat, screen studies needs to develop rigorous academic analyses of the emotional power associated with climate change and other Anthropocene phenomena. The recent return to Raymond Williams's concept of 'structure of feeling' among scholars in the environmental humanities is telling, and perhaps points to a certain opacity in the multiple ways in which 'affect' has been used in academic work of late. As Williams defined it, the 'structure of feeling' emphasizes affects, emotions and feelings as not simply individual psychological or neurological phenomena, but also collective. A 'structure of feeling' signifies an emergent set of shared sensibilities and values held in a specific time and place, most often expressed in cultural forms and conventions including the novel or the cinema.¹⁸ A robust consideration of Anthropocene structures of feeling, then, demands analysis of a range of cultural production from high to low brow and cutting across national boundaries, taking up the ways in which these texts are saturated with the often unexpressed concerns and preoccupations of their time.

Less prestigious (and more popular) television series may well be more adept at conveying Anthropocene structures of feeling, given the seeming reluctance of high culture to address developments that have been hiding in plain sight for years. Novelist and critic Amitav Ghosh laments the relative lack of literary fiction tackling climate change, which he rightly points out is a 'derangement' of artists' duty to engage with the great crises of their time.¹⁹ He cites the abundance of popular culture genres such as science fiction, young adult fiction and thrillers that have embraced the subject enthusiastically, while 'literary' fiction has come relatively late to the game. A similar high/low culture divide has beset the field of environmental film studies, with analysis of art cinema and documentary seldom considering the popular disaster films and television nature programmes that also address these structures of feeling, albeit in quite different registers and with different target audiences (of quite different size).²⁰ Our theorization of the banal Anthropocene and its traces in television's climate unconscious offers one pathway to a media studies engagement with environmental humanities – one that takes into

account the collective anxieties that have had such an impact on the popular culture of the Anthropocene.

The essays gathered in this dossier accordingly address themselves to customarily disregarded televisual forms, such as the cooking show, but also to prestige television in the form of the BBC America's spy drama *Killing Eve*, Showtime's dark comedy *Dexter* and AMC's post-apocalyptic zombie horror *The Walking Dead*. In their analyses of popular Food Network shows, Tisha Dejmanee and Diane Negra consider how the series intuit ways in which the Anthropocene pressures the American Dream, whether in male or female-centred form, relying on idealizing presentations of (gastro)nationalism, consumer citizenship and retreatist family values as ideological counterweights. In Dejmanee's words, 'banal consumption obliquely pits the survival of nationalist cultural values in opposition to the survival of the global ecosystem'. In her notion of a post-air-conditioning future, Julia Leyda situates the banal at the centre of her analysis of the taken-for-granted 'climate control' device that so few Americans notice. She argues that paying attention to popular television's representations of sweatiness can be one component of a viewing strategy, constructed around the concept of the climate unconscious, that can build a better awareness of the ways in which future changes in American daily experiences of hot weather are already being premediated in an array of television series in the banal Anthropocene. Maria Sulimma takes up the cat-and-mouse plotting of *Killing Eve* with an eye on the quotidian practices of aviation culture, which she finds operates as the show's 'climate unconscious'. For Sulimma, *Killing Eve*'s often euphoric presentation of easy air travel is logically central to Eve's and Villanelle's tracking of one another, and is a discomfiting narrative ingredient at a time of heightened sensitivity to the ecological costs of 'city hopping' by air.

As evidenced in interdisciplinary anthologies such as *Arts of Living on a Dying Planet* and *Mourning Nature*, environmental humanities as a field has begun to grapple with the emotions – especially the sense of grief – that characterize the contemporary moment, and that colour, motivate and perhaps also hamper public engagement with the most pressing issues of our time. With this dossier on television in/of the banal Anthropocene, we propose that media and cultural studies can contribute productively to the ongoing conversations about Anthropocene structures of feeling. In this necessarily limited analysis of television forms, we uncover some of the ways in which the medium is already attuned to climate alteration and (imminent) loss.