

Post-air-conditioning futures and the climate unconscious

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A taken-for-granted benefit of living in the belly of American late capitalism is the convenience and comfort of an air-conditioned environment. My essay title is meant to conjure an image of one of the more banal and quotidian absences in a possible climate-changed future, in which some of those aspects of what passes for modern life can no longer be assumed. I want to call attention to what this technology has meant for everyday life in the USA, both literally and as a signifier of what could change in a post-energy-transition future in which summers will be hotter and electricity more expensive. Air conditioning also makes for an appropriate symbol of elided global inequality that ground critiques of the totalizing conception of human agency that is causing climate change, the ‘anthro’ in Anthropocene. As a recent long-form article in the *Guardian* points out, most of those who enjoy the conveniences of air conditioning today live in parts of the world that emit far greater quantities of carbon than less-developed countries. The latter unsurprisingly suffer more from the effects of that distant consumption as the ferocity of heat waves increase, causing higher numbers of casualties among people who cannot afford air conditioning.¹ My arguments here will draw on existing scholarship in the environmental humanities to illustrate the ways in which film and television studies can benefit from and contribute to the pressing need to think through the current climate crisis using all disciplinary tools available. In this short essay I outline the viewing strategies that can develop via an exploration of the seemingly banal and everyday experience of sweating in the absence of what used to be called ‘indoor climate control’, or air conditioning.

1 Stephen Buranyi, ‘The air conditioning trap: how cold air is heating the world’, *The Guardian*, 29 August 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/aug/29/the-air-conditioning-trap-how-cold-air-is-heating-the-world>> accessed 21 December 2020.

2 Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 102.

3 Glenn Albrecht, 'Solastalgia and the new mourning', 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), p. 300.

4 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), p. 11.

The scarcity or loss of air conditioning would certainly qualify as a catalyst for 'petromelancholia', described by Stephanie LeMenager as 'the feeling of losing cheap energy that came relatively easily'.² Petromelancholia joins a burgeoning crop of neologisms that attests to the need for new vocabularies for a new era of climate change: among these I would highlight Glenn Albrecht's term 'solastalgia', which refers to 'the existential, lived experience of the loss of value in the present as manifest in a feeling of disorientation, of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the home environment'.³ Solastalgia can be a useful concept in analysing how popular culture forms such as television and film might represent in a graspable way otherwise elusive emotional responses to phenomena that occur on scales of time and space too vast for a single human to apprehend. Environmental humanities scholars commonly invoke Timothy Morton's notion of the 'hyperobject' to signify this mismatch of the individual's perceptual ability and large-scale phenomena such as climate change. In my argument here, on the other hand, I seek to illuminate some of the banal, overlooked traces in television programmes that, when we notice them, indicate the often hard-to-comprehend contours of climate crisis in everyday life.

I will expand the purview of these analytical concepts by theorizing a 'climate unconscious' that can be located, if we look for it, nestled into our screen cultures: a trace of meaning that points to climate change, which is not overtly signalled yet arguably informs significant structures of feeling in the early 21st century. I consider the climate unconscious of US television drama, moving beyond the 'hook of the thematic', as Jennifer Wenzel puts it in her work in the energy humanities, and instead excavating the role of air conditioning in televisual 'fossil fuel imaginaries' as evidence that energy 'is at once everywhere and nowhere, indispensable yet largely unapprehended, not so much invisible as unseen'.⁴

After a brief look at the historical significance of air conditioning in the USA throughout the 20th century, I explore some of the ways in which 21st-century American television dramas are already mediating a range of experiences that give us a sense of what it would be like to do without it, in the context of this dossier's exploration of the banal Anthropocene in/on television. In his social history of air conditioning, Raymond Arsenault delves into the genealogy of this now banal, taken-for-granted device, pointing out not only its role in the rapid urbanization and population growth of the so-called Sunbelt, but also its less recognized social and public health benefits. Beyond making life more comfortable and enabling longer hours and more productive indoor work environments from offices to schoolrooms, the widespread adoption of air conditioning led to significant declines in summertime fatalities across the American South, from patients in hospital operating theatres and recovery rooms to those suffering from chronic cardiovascular and

- 5 Raymond Arsenault, 'The end of the long hot summer: the air conditioner and Southern culture', *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 50, no. 4 (1984), pp. 597–628, 616–18.

pulmonary conditions.⁵ Arsenault's deep dive into one of the unsung mechanical heroes of the 20th century makes for fascinating reading; not only for the surprising minutiae uncovered by his exhaustive research, but also for the ways it supports this dossier's wider argument about the banal Anthropocene. As he explains in exacting detail, air conditioning throughout the last century became a kind of background noise in American life, a nearly unremarked hum in the everyday lives of millions of people. With this in mind, I argue that a viewing strategy that takes up the climate unconscious 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.

As we in the high carbon-consuming nations slowly come to terms with the realities of climate change amid increasing extreme weather and record-breaking temperatures, I have been researching and teaching 'cli-fi' – climate fiction – to track how fictional climate-changed scenarios can spark our imagination and how our experiences of cli-fi can work to prepare us for possible futures. What strikes me about so much cli-fi is that, in addition to its emphasis on the new circumstances to which we will have to adapt in coming decades, it also portrays characters yearning for the everyday things they have to do without. The Danish cli-fi film *QEDA* (Max Kestner, 2017), for example, shows the routine use of ration cards for fresh water as a feature of daily life in a Copenhagen partially submerged after a rise in sea levels; in addition to the computer-generated images of this iconic Scandinavian city under water, one of the most poignant details in that film is the melancholy with which the characters remember the pleasures of fresh fruit and coffee. The solastalgia evinced by such new absences can be as affecting as the new presence of water flooding the city, and can catalyse viewers' imaginations to picture the everyday things we could have to do without in the climate-changed future. Another of those everyday things is a stable power grid fuelled by seemingly unlimited electricity, enabling homes and businesses in hot climates to run air conditioners.

Watching the post-apocalyptic series *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–) with a viewing strategy informed by the climate unconscious, one of the most terrifying effects, beyond the monstrosity of the other humans, is for me (as a New Orleans native) the notion that survivors of the zombie apocalypse in the southeastern USA must endure life without the comforting drone of air conditioning. As I have written elsewhere,⁶ this series conveys important Anthropocene affects not only in its overt thematics of survival amid the threat of extinction, but also in its seemingly endless sweltering summer. Its setting in Georgia and the surrounding region, combined with its shooting schedules falling mostly in the summer months, means that one of its (less overt and perhaps unintentional) significations is that of a post-air-conditioning era. Reading the series alongside paratexts such as Reddit threads with topics like 'why is Rick always so sweaty', and articles about the endless labour

- 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, p. 17.

of the show's makeup artists having to repair the inevitable melting on innumerable zombie extras, I have begun to look at other contemporary televisual representations of extreme heat and sweatiness in a new light. How do contemporary TV series use extreme heat as an affective device? Can it be read as a signifier of a banal Anthropocene that prompts American viewers to imagine themselves in such inhospitable, un-climate-controlled environments?

The first season of Marvel's *Daredevil* (Netflix, 2015–18), for example, is set in a version of contemporary New York, yet its portrayal of Hell's Kitchen and the rest of the city is unrecognizable in many ways. The white ethnic nostalgia of the neighbourhood's Irishness, heavily stressed through the lead character, blind lawyer Matt Murdock, whose troubled Catholicism combines in interesting ways with the mise-en-scene, produces an anxious, stifling atmosphere. This is punctuated by visual markers of a summer heat that echoes the story's tension around a spiralling crime wave in the neighbourhood. The heavy use of yellow filters maintains the impression of an infernal urban hell-scape, in which the villain sets multiple simultaneous fires. In keeping with this diabolic theme, the palette of the series leans heavily toward reds and other warm colours, clearly seen in the credits sequence with its stylized effect of red paint dripping over all of the legal and religious icons relevant to the series: the blind justice statue, a praying angel, and the superhero himself in a devil costume. *Daredevil* cultivates a retro feel despite its contemporary settings and super-powered denizens, portraying a still 'authentic' Irish American Hell's Kitchen, complete with Irish gangsters and kindly Irish priests coaching orphans at a boxing gym, with few traces of the gentrification that has drastically altered the neighbourhood in recent decades. Adding to its temporal incongruities, the ubiquitous neo-noir shadows of window blinds and beads of sweat visible on the characters' faces recall an earlier time in filmmaking as well as in the history of New York City.

With its stylized mise-en-scene, *Daredevil* deploys neo-noir moods and motifs more appropriate to California- or Florida-set fictions such as *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981) or *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), in which the louche lead characters languish in the sultry humidity of the American South or stagger stupefied through blinding golden sunshine. In those precursors, the pre-air-conditioning era of the early 20th century serves as the setting for struggles between corruption and the forces of justice, often fronted by inadequate and hesitant champions. Here the blind superhero fights on two fronts: in the daytime legal arena as attorney to the poor and disadvantaged, and in the night streets as a sweaty fist-fighting vigilante. The pervasive (and nostalgic) grittiness and grime of the series, amplified by the constant heat, contribute to an aesthetic that recalls the earlier noir visual style, but the garish red hues and inexplicable and anachronistic absence of air conditioning announce something different – what I take to be another instance of the banal Anthropocene. When looked at in this way, as part of a contemporary

structure of feeling that includes an awareness of climate change, the series constitutes a premediation of our post-air-conditioning future.

Some interesting parallels with *Daredevil* begin to crop up when discussing the concept of a climate unconscious in relation to other shows. For example, my students pointed out to me another series that features a lead character who is almost always sweating: like the leads in *The Walking Dead* and *Daredevil*, Showtime's eight-season, award-winning series *Dexter* (2006–13) features as its eponymous anti-hero a white male protagonist frequently portrayed in sweaty situations in balmy Miami. This series exemplifies the climate unconscious strategy of viewing posited by this essay, as in my earlier reference to *The Walking Dead*. First, and most obviously, *Dexter* is frequently shot in visibly sweaty clothing, though not quite on the scale of *The Walking Dead*'s Rick. After all, *Dexter* is not set in a post-air-conditioning era and thus he can wear long trousers and long-sleeved shirts and still remain relatively crisp, even in Miami.

While *Dexter*'s sweatiness is entirely plausible and occurs when he spends extended periods outside in the high-humidity subtropical heat, the combination of the physical evidence of overheating and notable affective elements in the series exemplifies its depiction of the banal Anthropocene. *Dexter* pushes the limits of viewer sympathies, with its lead's double life as a police department forensic expert on crime scene blood-spatter and as a psychopathic serial killer who targets (as far as he knows) only highly unsympathetic violent criminals who 'needed killing', as we say in the South. This vigilante aspect of his character arc, often positioning him as avenger of the victims of unpunished offenders, enables easy comparisons to two popular forms of cultural narrative: Westerns and superhero narratives, including *Daredevil*. But as with other semi-sympathetic anti-heroes of recent TV, such as Tony Soprano or Walter White, for whom a happy ending seems unlikely, the series constructs an ever-present undertone of suspense and dread in which the viewer constantly fears *Dexter*'s discovery by police colleagues and/or death at the hands of an intended victim. Although this dread-filled suspense does not stem from the same origin, it participates in a structure of feeling that also includes the recently delineated mental disorder related to climate change, 'eco-anxiety', which psychologists identify as a new marker of contemporary life in the climate crisis.⁷

The series relies on some of the same affective scenarios as the zombie and superhero series: revulsion, dread and fear, combined with an ambivalence towards the main character's moral compass. *Dexter*'s almost unthinkable cold-blooded violence alternating with his mild-mannered, nebbish public persona has viewers constantly wondering which is the 'real' *Dexter*. Placing these scenarios in the wider cultural context of the climate crisis, this conflicted, split-personality trope (also dominant in *Daredevil*) may also extend to the viewing audience itself, and their perverse ability to live their daily lives 'normally' with full knowledge of the effect that their (individual and collective) behaviour is

7 Fiona Charlson, 'The rise of "eco-anxiety": climate change affects our mental health too', *The Conversation*, 17 September 2019, <<https://theconversation.com/the-rise-of-eco-anxiety-climate-change-affects-our-mental-health-too-123002>> accessed 21 December 2020.

Fig. 1. A moody suspense thriller set in tropical, flood-prone contemporary Miami, the Showtime award-winner *Dexter* (2006–13) premediates aesthetics and affects of our possible post-air-conditioning futures.



having on the environment. Also begging for more interpretation is the fact that both Dexter and Murdock are emotionally damaged white men whose life mission is meting out vigilante justice while maintaining the facade of a legal or law enforcement professional. In this context the ambiguous anti-hero emerges as a form of aspirational representation that allows white and/or male viewers to imagine themselves as anonymous heroes battling the contradictions inherent in contemporary American lifestyles – lifestyles that are dependent on fossil fuels and directly responsible for a significant proportion of the carbon emissions that exacerbate the climate crisis. Serendipitously, for my argument, Dexter conceals his murder trophies – wet-mount slides of blood samples from his victims – inside an old window air conditioner unit in his beachfront apartment, as if teasing us to pay more attention to the climate (figure 1).

Amplifying what Mike Davis has identified as the ‘sunshine noir’ of Los Angeles-set films such as *Chinatown*,⁸ *Dexter* portrays its title character in a constant struggle against crime and corruption, while living in a place that appears to be a paradise of palm trees, white sandy beaches and year-round warm weather. Moreover, *Dexter*’s setting in Miami, perhaps the first major US city to suffer the drastic effects of rapid sea-level rise, adds a metaphorical sense of impending and irrevocable doom to the drama. The experience of watching *Dexter* today, especially for many US viewers, can be inflected by recent headlines about the city’s knotty problems around rising sea-levels and subsidence: although not actually new, the city’s problems are newly prominent in national media such as the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*.⁹ In March 2019, Yale Environment 360 reported that the phenomenon of ‘sunny day flooding’ or tidal flooding along the coastal southeastern USA increased ‘160 percent from 2000 to 2017’ and will most likely continue its rise, along with sea levels. I suggest, therefore, that in addition to the (entirely region-appropriate) representation of extreme heat in the form of sweaty characters, *Dexter*’s setting of Miami itself has the potential to trigger cultural knowledge and low-level

⁸ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York, NY: Verso, 1991).

⁹ Ban Ki-Moon and Francis Suarez, ‘Miami battles rising seas’, *New York Times*, 20 February 2019, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/20/opinion/ban-ki-moon-miami-climate-change.html>>; Carolyn Kormann, ‘Miami faces an underwater future’, *The New Yorker*, 3 July 2018, <<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/miami-faces-an-underwater-future>> both accessed 21 December 2020.

10 See, for example, David Ingram, *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000); Stephen Rust, Salma Monani and Sean Cubitt (eds), *Ecomedia: Key Issues* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015); John Parham, *Green Media and Popular Culture* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

11 Wenzel, 'Introduction', p. 13.

anxieties stoked by recurring news stories about sea-level rise and climate crisis denial.

Thematic cultural studies approaches to Anthropocene screen media have yielded, and continue to yield, fruitful research that attests to the ascendancy of environmental degradation in contemporary popular culture.¹⁰ Yet not enough scholarship has comprehensively theorized the myriad ways in which the aesthetics and affects of the Anthropocene so utterly permeate media texts as to lie below the radar, as taken-for-granted subtexts and contexts that typically fail to call attention to themselves. This essay begins to pose the kinds of questions to film and television scholars that Wenzel outlines in her call for further development in the energy humanities: 'Beyond questions of theme, how else do genre and other matters of form look different when we consider energy? What work do particular cultural forms do in making our relation to energy visible or obscuring it from view?'¹¹ By foregrounding unremarked traces of the banal Anthropocene, even in everyday texts, and calling attention to subtexts of cultural knowledge, the climate unconscious reading strategy I have outlined here may encourage viewers to begin the process of recognizing televisual premediations of possible climate-changed futures, a first step in facing those futures and imagining how it will feel to live in them.