

Prof. Berns – Seminar II

Fossil Fuel in British Literature and Culture: 1800 and 2000

Fuel is hard-wired into our societies and we rely on its various forms in everyday life. Shifts in fuel sources catalyze massive changes in the societies that adopt them and their international relations. The shift to fossil fuel has accelerated global warming and is affecting our wider planetary systems. In the literary and cultural representation of contemporary life fuel seems hard to find, but there are notable exceptions. Moreover, fuel may be less invisible than we may think; perhaps we need to learn how to notice and read it? In this seminar we will discuss poetry, paintings, plays and films that explicitly grapple with the role of fuel – its ecological, social-political and economic impact – at two historical moments. We will revisit the late eighteenth century when Britain transitioned from renewable energy to a coal-based economy. And we will take a closer look at representations of oil in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, also with a transatlantic perspective.

In our discussions we will include recent research in ecocriticism and the Environmental Humanities but our main focus will be on the primary material itself. In the early period authors will include, among others, Anna Seward, Dorothy and William Wordsworth and Joanna Baillie; in the late period we will tackle material by dramatists John McGrath and Ella Hickson or the film director Paul Thomas Anderson. We will analyse how fuel materializes in the texts including theatre, film etc., how the texts register its ecological, social and political implications, and how they shape the reader's or viewer's attitude to fuel

The material for this class (apart from the films) will be provided via the platform AGORA.

Credit requirements:

- Regular attendance
- participation in an expert group
- written responses preparatory to classes (at the lecturer's discretion)
- Oral contribution
- For full credits: seminar paper