

Wasteocene. Disaster Narratives & Knowledge Practices

Workshop, Research Project Slow Disasters in the Wasteocene (SLoDiWa)

16.01.2025, 15:00-18:00, Glanzstoffhaus: GSH.06.25

Martin Repohl

Titel: Looking for Resonance in the Wasteocene - Insights on subversive relational quality from Bitterfeld, Asse II and the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone

Abstract:

In what ways is the potential for world-relationships undergoing a transformation as a consequence of the progressive contamination and destruction of the natural environment? Does the Wasteocene herald an era of alienation, or does it offer new possibilities for resonance with and within a polluted and contaminated natural world? The presentation employs three empirical examples to illustrate how varying degrees of contamination influence the potential for world relations. The concept of contactpoint will be employed to illustrate how the chemical contamination in Bitterfeld, the contained radioactive contamination in the ruined Asse II nuclear waste repository and in the highly radioactive contaminated Chernobyl Exclusion Zone manifest different types of a subversive relational quality that undermines possibilities for resonance, but simultaneously also opens up new perspectives on material being-in-the-world.

Katharina Kalthoff (Bergische Universität Wuppertal)

Title “Un-knowing Disaster through Toxic Narratives and Practices. Greening, Grieving and Hiding in Plain Sight“

Abstract:

According to Marco Armiero, a ‘toxic narrative’ comprises four key ingredients: concealing, naturalizing/normalizing injustice, dismissing knowledge and experience, and ultimately blaming the victims. In the context of polluting industries, these elements are often combined to create a ‘murky broth’ in which disasters—particularly slow-moving environmental crises—are hidden in plain sight. This narrative framework employs a range of practices that obscure, sanitize, and render harmful activities ‘invisible’, or rather unknowable. These practices shape collective memory, thus influencing how environmental harm is perceived. In this paper, I will explore these intersections from both cultural studies and narratological perspectives, focusing on three case studies of slow disasters: ‘coal mine tourism’, the greenwashed planning of a massive nuclear power plant, and the pseudo-concealing practices surrounding a toxic waste dump. I will examine how practices such as erecting superficially ‘green’ memorials, producing ignorance through endless reports and scientific narratives, physically concreting polluted land, and greenwashing environmental damage—work

together to foster a public sentiment of *sorrow* rather than *anger*, therefore an affective shift that mitigates outrage over environmental injustices. Through this lens, the paper will contribute to a broader understanding of how such toxic narratives and practices influence the ways in which disasters are known, or un-known.

Natalia Mollenhauer

Title: Dams, extractivism and inequality in Southern Patagonia

Abstract:

The hydroelectric dam project on the Santa Cruz River, Argentina, is presented as an emblematic case of the extractivist model and its socio-environmental impacts. Santa Cruz, a province historically dependent on the extraction of natural resources, faces with this project challenges related to economic dependence, environmental degradation and the construction of narratives that justify progress.

The Néstor Kirchner and Jorge Cepernic dams promise renewable energy, connectivity and development, but they entail negative impacts such as the loss of biodiversity and the impact on local communities. These official narratives reinforce an imaginary of inevitable and positive development, minimizing conflicts and structural inequalities. In turn, these narratives contribute to the configuration of the region as a “sacrifice zone,” where environmental and social sustainability are subordinated to global interests. Local resistance and feminist critiques reconfigure the narrative, highlighting the exploitation of the river as a metaphor for patriarchal and extractivist inequalities.

Julieta Blázquez

“Making Coal Knowledge in the Peripheries: On the History of Disasters and Mining in Argentinian Southern Patagonia (1943-2023)”

Abstract:

This presentation explores key aspects of knowledge production, communication and transformation around coal in Río Turbio, a peripheral mining enclave in Argentina’s Southern Patagonia, from a history of knowledge perspective. Between 1943 and 2023, diverse networks of actors –including university agents, administrative employees of the mining company, miners and their families, the government, the press and environmental movements– have constructed and contested knowledge about coal in a context marked by disasters, energy transitions and climate crises. With an interdisciplinary approach that combines social and environmental history with science and technology studies, the research seeks to contribute to the understanding of the relationships between knowledge, power and periphery in the historical configuration of this strategic resource in the global south.

A central axis of this presentation is the question of the temporality of coal, understood not only from its material and geological dimension, but also as a historical category that articulates different perceptions of time: from the urgencies of extractivism to the memories of disasters and the projections of energy futures. The presentation is part of my doctoral research, which analyses these dynamics in order to understand the links between knowledge, politics and territory in this peripheral context.

Cécile Stehrenberger

“Wasted Melons. Entangling Histories of Chlorothalonil in and beyond Costa Rica/Germany“

Abstract:

This presentation explores the history of the production, the distribution, and the use of the fungicide chlorothalonil, in the context of the cultivation and export of melons in and from Costa Rica. It focuses on various places and episodes in and during which different actors, including academics, activists, and journalists have problematized the presence of residues of the chemical that was detected or assumed to exist in fruit – exported to Europe -, in Costa Rican drinking water, and in the bodies of agricultural workers in the Central American countries (many of them immigrants from Costa Rica´s neighbouring country Nicaragua). It explores how in the context of these problematizations melons became wasted (*basurificación*), while the wasting/turning into/treating as waste/land (*basurificación*) of man and nature has been highlighted (or not). The presentation also shows how the problematization of Chlorotalonil has involved the mobilization, and the challenging of different types of knowledge and different types of epistemic/legal entities and truth figures (including “limit values” and “scientific experts”). Moreover, I trace the production of ignorance through disinformation and “undone science”, and the role that epistemic uncertainties have played in it, analysing the epistemic and mnemonic violence enabled by the resulting “swirl” of “chemical violence”.