



CIEE Global Institute – Berlin

Course name:	Nature and Culture in Transnational Perspective
Course number:	(GI) ENVI 2004 BRGE
Programs offering course:	Berlin Open Campus, Berlin Global Architecture + Design
Open Campus Track:	Sustainability and Environmental Sciences
Language of instruction:	English
U.S. semester credits:	3
Contact hours:	45
Term:	Spring 2020

Course Description

This course takes an interdisciplinary approach to contemporary environmental issues. Specifically, it addresses how the humanities, different art forms, popular media, and knowledge cultures are vital to debates about the environment. The course engages with the emerging transnational discussion of issues such as toxic waste, climate change, fracking, and the role of genetically modified plants and animals in agriculture by exploring their philosophical, political, and artistic implications. The unique comparative opportunities that emerge in the context of international education are emphasized by fostering student interaction with the host culture in order to reach a culturally informed understanding of our shared ecosystem.

Learning Objectives

By completing this course, students will:

- Reach a comprehensive understanding of how “nature” cannot be adequately grasped without a critical reflection of the nature-culture divide and its cultural specificities and national histories.
- Learn how literature, art, and the media impact contemporary conceptions of the ecosystem as gendered, raced, and classed, and how these conceptions are culturally specific.
- Develop an understanding of the philosophical and, sometimes, ideological, implications that inhere in various representations of the culture-nature divide in movies, advertisements, newspapers, and online media clips.
- Establish a different, potentially deeper relationship to the host culture by learning to see it as home to various species, including animals and plants.
- Learn about how the host culture approaches environmental challenges politically, legally, economically, and through its institutions, and how the world of business and technological research are (re)acting in this framework.

Course Prerequisites

None.



Methods of Instruction

This course is highly interactive and combines discussions (about the texts, films, etc.), in-class group work, and in-class presentations. The more theoretical parts of class sessions will sometimes consist of short lectures as well. Students will be asked to do their own fieldwork (e.g. taking photos, interviewing locals, local organizations, or other students) that will also be discussed in class. Since this course is designed to be highly interactive, students are expected to take part in discussions and debates, which will in most cases not be about “right” or “wrong,” but rather about finding individual and new approaches to framing the ecosystem intellectually, and using plausible arguments to analyze and evaluate the ways humans approach nature and its resources. The overall aim of the course is to learn how to think critically and originally. In order to encourage enquiry-based learning, students will be asked to answer questions, either individually or in groups, about an assigned text, film, initiative, etc. The instructor will use a broad selection of teaching methods including PowerPoint, audio-visual material, guest lectures, excursions, but also personal narrative, group work, and traditional teaching units.

Assessment and Final Grade

Students will be assessed according to the following criteria:

1. Participation:	20%
2. Presentation:	20%
3. Field research and written analysis:	20%
4. Creative project:	15%
5. Final exam:	25%
TOTAL:	100%

Course Requirements

Presentation

Each student is expected (together with one or two other students) to lead a 15-minute presentation of one particular text, topic, or media example, followed by questions posed to the class, which are meant to spark discussion. One week before the presentation, the group meets with the instructor to discuss possible questions. It is expected that at that point they have all read the assigned text, have thought about the topic, and suggest a question or two. The group then decides which questions to choose, together with the instructor. Following that meeting each presenter* has time to prepare additional questions/input that she/he will use during the discussion to further inspire the conversation. The presentation also includes a written self-assessment after the event: what went well? What didn't? What would I do differently if I were to do this again? The self-assessment must be submitted on the Monday following the event and will be commented on by the instructor who adds his/her impression of the presentation.



Please Note: It is important that you see your instructor at least one week before your presentation to discuss possible lead questions, topics, and potential pitfalls. The grade results from the overall quality of the presentation (10%) and the way the presentation is prepared and carried out by each individual student (10%). While the first part of the grade will be the same for all in the group, the second may vary, depending on the individual student's performance.

* **Important:** presenters are not panelists; after your presentation, your job is to encourage your fellow students to contribute their ideas and well-founded views. Just like an orchestra conductor, you have to make sure that nobody dominates the discussion and that *all* contribute. Encourage them to also ask *each* other questions, or comment on what another student has said. Direct the conversation by saying things like: "Student x has just brought up the historical situation in Berlin and how the division of the city has impacted the city's ecology. Let's compare this to the United States. How does US history contribute to how we integrate nature into our cities?" Note: the questions following a presentation are not about creating a compromise that all can agree upon. It is all about controversy, inspiring arguments, multiple viewpoints and varying paradigms.

Field Research and Written Analysis

The course includes two written reflections on the excursions. For each, you are expected to create a 1500-word documentation of the event (that you can, ideally, save as part of a course portfolio and a memory of your time abroad). The documentation includes: a) one paragraph that describes the object/event (5%) and how it affected you emotionally and/or intellectually (5%) , b) 3-5 bullet points where you apply categories such as culture, nature, nationality—but also, potentially, gender, ethnicity, class (5%). Add a picture that you took of the figure/event (5%). The PDF file must be submitted on Canvas before the next class meeting after the event.

Creative Project

In this course, you are not only studying literature, the arts, and the environment from an interdisciplinary standpoint, but will try your hand at crafting an individual, creative, response to an environmental topic. Your creative project can be an autobiographical, literary piece, e.g. a poem about the city from an animal's perspective. You can do a trash sculpture to respond to the pollution of the environment. How about a mini land art project for the local community or a digital story? The project will be graded on originality (5%) and artistic quality (5%), as well as on an accompanying 400-word piece (5%), which will discuss the significance of the project and its relation to some of the material previously discussed in the course. Please note that your project will become part of a final exhibition on your local CIEE campus.



Final Exam

The exam will give students a chance to present what they have learned during this course by answering multiple choice-, matching-, and short essay questions. Questions will refer to the concepts discussed and include a few practical examples, e.g. a painting, an advertisement, a short poem, a PETA campaign, etc.

Participation

Participation is valued as meaningful contribution in the digital and tangible classroom, utilizing the resources and materials presented to students as part of the course. Meaningful contribution requires students to be prepared in advance of each class session and to have regular attendance. Students must clearly demonstrate they have engaged with the materials as directed, for example, through classroom discussions, online discussion boards, peer-to-peer feedback (after presentations), interaction with guest speakers, and attentiveness on co-curricular and outside-of-classroom activities.

Reacting to, understanding, and interpreting the various texts, films, and other forms of cultural expression will be the central focus of this class. Film screenings and visits to cultural (campus and/or community) events will be obligatory for all students. Participants will be asked to take notes during visits or screenings. The grade for participation is comprised of the quantity and quality of your contributions to discussions as well as of the performance on in-class writing exercises and classroom activities (writing exercises are designed to sharpen the student's writing skills and to promote the student's engagement with course concepts and texts). Participation grades will be provided on a weekly basis.

A note on preparation: Students are expected to come to every class prepared with the reading—please bring a print-out of the respective text(s).

Attendance Policy

Regular class attendance is required throughout the program, and all unexcused absences will result in a lower participation grade for any affected CIEE course. Due to the intensive schedules for Open Campus and Short Term programs, unexcused absences that constitute more than 10% of the total course will result in a written warning.

Students who transfer from one CIEE class to another during the add/drop period will not be considered absent from the first session(s) of their new class, provided they were marked present for the first session(s) of their original class. Otherwise, the absence(s) from the original class carry over to the new class and count against the grade in that class.



For CIEE classes, excessively tardy (over 15 minutes late) students must be marked absent. Attendance policies also apply to any required co-curricular class excursion or event, as well as to Internship, Service Learning, or required field placement. Students who miss class for personal travel, including unforeseen delays that arise as a result of personal travel, will be marked as absent and unexcused. No make-up or re-sit opportunity will be provided.

Attendance policies also apply to any required class excursion, with the exception that some class excursions cannot accommodate any tardiness, and students risk being marked as absent if they fail to be present at the appointed time.

Unexcused absences will lead to the following penalties:

<i>Percentage of Total Course Hours Missed</i>	<i>Equivalent Number of Open Campus Semester classes</i>	<i>Minimum Penalty</i>
Up to 10%	1 content classes, or up to 2 language classes	Participation graded as per class requirements
10 – 20%	2 content classes, or 3-4 language classes	Participation graded as per class requirements; written warning
More than 20%	3 content classes, or 5 language classes	Automatic course failure , and possible expulsion

Weekly Schedule

NOTE: This schedule is subject to change at the discretion of the instructor to take advantage of current experiential learning opportunities.

Module 1: Nature and Culture

Our first two weeks will introduce some general concepts from the field of ecocriticism while focusing on two core concerns: the nature-culture divide in Western thought and the relationship between the local and the planetary.



Week 1

Class 1:1 Introduction

We will use this first day of class to get to know each other, understand who we are in the context of the larger, cultural, regional and climate-specific ecosystems we individually come from and discuss sustainable cultural alternatives to the status quo. Taking this as a starting point we will go on a stroll to a nearby park to visit some of the animals that share the city with us, and discuss how their habitat is defined by the lives of urban dwellers.

Neighborhood Site Visit: Tierpark Neukölln: we will learn how cultural memories, nature education, and a business model go hand in hand here.

Please don't forget to bring a camera and take a picture to document the event. See deadline next week.

Please note:

- you are not permitted to go online during this site visit!
- two volunteers are needed for next session's presentation! Please send me an email if you are interested!

Week 2

Class 2:1 The Culture-Nature Divide as Departmental Divide

We will discuss how the nature-culture divide has been a defining part of Western thought and how it has led to a compartmentalization of knowledge in academia (the "humanities" and the "sciences"). Taking this as a starting point we will discuss to what extent it makes sense to distinguish between the local and the planetary.

Reading:

Austin Hughes, "The Folly of Scientism," *The New Atlantis* (Fall 2012): 1-19.
<http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-folly-of-scientism>

Class 2:2 Sense of Place, Sense of Planet

The class will take place, weather permitting, on the Tempelhof airfield with its unique mix of environmentally protected landscape, urban gardening project, bee-keeping, urban picnic area, and historical site of the Berlin Airlift (with global political ramifications).

Reading:

Ursula Heise. "From Blue Planet to Google Earth: Environmentalism, Ecocriticism, and the Imagination of the Global." *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), 17-65.

Optional:

"The Fracking Song" ("My Water's On Fire Tonight"). YouTube.

Module 2: Political Ecologies: Nature and Democracy

This second unit will focus on the relationship between humans and "nature." We will attend to our understanding of democracy, along with notions of consumerism and prosperity to develop a "greener" cultural sensibility.

Week 3

Class 3:1

Site Visit: "Gardens of the World"

Located in the middle of the Marzahn neighborhood in the Eastern part of Berlin, the gardens offer an ideal site to study the contrast between socialist high-rise building blocks and several beautiful European and Asian gardens skillfully embedded in this urban landscape:

<https://www.visitberlin.de/en/districts/marzahn-hellersdorf>

Reading:

Lawrence Buell. "The Ethics and Politics of Environmental Politics and Criticism." *The Future of Environmental Criticism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. 97-127.

Class 3:2

Rethinking the Good Life

This session problematizes some of the ideas that we've discussed in the previous session. Is a "return to nature" possible, or desirable? Is salvation to be found in alternative technologies? Or should we, rather, turn to a more sustainable, modest life style?

Reading:

Kate Soper. "Neither the 'Simple Backward Look' nor the 'Simple Progressive Thrust': Ecocriticism and the Politics of Prosperity." 157-173.

Optional:

Take a look at the “Cultures of Consumption Programme.”

www.consume.bbk.ac.uk

Class 3:3

Site Visit with Students from the Host Culture

On-site visit of a grassroots “*Schrebergarten-Kolonie*” and conversation with two of its founding members about the connection between grassroots democracy, ecofeminism, and a miniature world without fences, pesticides, and electricity.

Week 4

Class 4:1

Animal Rights, Animal Welfare

This session focuses a local initiative that connects humans with animals—a cat café (there are several in this city) where you can enjoy your café latte with a soft, purring cat on your lap... What is happening here? How do we define our relationship with animals and why do we consider some to be our friends while others end up in our frying pans on a routine basis? What is the philosophy behind this, what would be a more democratic approach, should we all stop drinking milk and have a cup of tea instead?

Reading:

John Berger. “Why Look at Animals?” (1977). 3-28, and Jonathan Safran Foer. *Eating Animals*. NY. Back Bay Books, 2009. 24-33.

Optional Reading: J.M. Coetzee. *The Lives of Animals*. 1999.

Class 4:2

Rethinking Ecological Crisis

In this session, we will discuss eco-critical thinker Bruno Latour’s call for a “political ecology.” Latour argues that environmental organizations and political action groups have had limited influence due to a fundamental misconception of well-established concepts of nature, politics, society, and culture.

Reading:

Bruno Latour. “What Is to Be Done? Political Ecology!” *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. MA: Harvard UP, 2004. 221-230.

Optional Reading:

Elizabeth Kolbert. “Prologue” and “Welcome to the Anthropocene.” *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. 2012. 92-110.

Due date for submission of first field research and written analysis

Module 3: The Environmental Imagination

While other sessions have already introduced artwork and literature to explain and discuss our topic this last unit will now focus entirely on the role of literature, art, film, music, and other forms of cultural expression in helping save the planet.

Week 5

Class 5:1 Going Plantwards: Art and the New Transcendentalism

In this session, we will further complicate the biopolitical debate and discuss why it is primarily animals, not plants, that we seem to be concerned about whenever we talk about the extinction of species. Yet instead of diving deeply into theory, we will use this session to look into art history and poetry, where the plant kingdom has always been alive and thriving.

Reading:

Jeffrey Nealon. "Coda." *Plant Theory*, 2016. 109-122.

Optional Viewing:

Bill Viola. "Owl—I do not know what it is what I'm like." (youtube)

Class 5:2 Film after Nature

Disaster films belong to the most widely known, creative responses to natural catastrophes and debates on climate change. In this session, we will investigate the "cultural work" (Jane Tompkins) of the contemporary disaster movie.

Viewing:

The Road (based on the novel by Cormack McCarthy)

Optional Reading:

Kate Rigby. "Writing After Nature." *Australian Humanities Review* 39-40 (Sept. 2006). Online.

"Will Fiction Influence How We React to Climate Change?" Room for Debate Blog. *New York Times* 29 July 2015. Online.

Due date for final exam



Class 5:3 Site Visit: We will see a performance at the famous HAU-theater and find out more about the “Animals, Politics, Performance” project there.

Week 6

Class 6:1 The Americanization of Climate Change? Squarzoni’s Graphic Novel
Commonly perceived as a somewhat gritty part of popular culture, graphic novels have become a major source of inspiration for “serious” readers. Art Spiegelman’s autobiographical narrative about the Holocaust, *Maus*, or Alison Bechdel’s coming-out story *Fun Home*, are two earlier examples for this trend. In this session, we will discuss Philippe Squarzoni’s *Climate Changed*—a graphic novel that merges scientific findings about climate change, the human experience of the local, and a discussion about the function of art in an age of ecological self-destruction.

Reading:

Philippe Squarzoni. *Climate Changed*, 2014. 8-74.

Optional Reading:

Elmar Schmidt. “Latin American Environmental Discourses, Indigenous Ecological Consciousness and the Problem of “Authentic” Native Identities.” *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*. Hubert Zapf, ed. Berlin/Boston: DeGruyter, 2016. 413-437.

Due date for submission of second field research and written analysis

Class 6:2 Creative Project

Preparation: Collect what you want to bring to our creative art project. Every student is expected to contribute two things: an object and a short text about it.

Due date for submission of creative project

Readings

Berger John. *Why Look at Animals?* New York: Penguin, 2009.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism*. Malden: Blackwell, 2005.

Coetzee, J.M. *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Eating Animals*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2010.

- Gore, Al. *An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do about It*. New York: Rodale, 2006.
- Heise, Ursula. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Hughes, Austin L. "The Folly of Scientism," *The New Atlantis* 37 (Fall 2012): 32-50.
- Kolbert, Elizabeth. *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Latour, Bruno. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Mauch, Christof, and Silvia Mayer, eds. *American Environments: Climate-Cultures-Catastrophe*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2012.
- Nealon, Jeffrey. *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015.
- Rigby, Kate. "Writing After Nature." *Australian Humanities Review* 39-40 (Sept. 2006).
- Schmidt, Elmar. "Latin American Environmental Discourses, Indigenous Ecological Consciousness and the Problem of "Authentic" Native Identities." In *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, edited by Hubert Zapf, 413-437. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016.
- Soper Kate. "Neither the 'Simple Backward Look' nor the 'Simple Progressive Thrust': Ecocriticism and the Politics of Prosperity" In *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, edited by Hubert Zapf, 157-173. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016.
- Squarzoni, Philippe. *Climate Changed*. Translated by Ivanka Hahnenberger. New York: Abrams, 2014.