Course title: Nature and Culture in Transnational Perspective
Course code: (GI) ENVI 2004 BRGE
Programs offering course: Global Architecture and Design, Berlin Open Campus Block
Open Campus Track: STEM and Society
Language of instruction: English
U.S. semester credits: 3.00
Contact hours: 45.00
Term: Spring Block II 2021

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 interacting with local natural and built environments and seeing various local species up-close, including both 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
1. **Group Presentation**  
   20%

2. **Field Research and Written Analysis**  
   20%

3. **Creative Project**  
   15%

4. **Take-Home Exam**  
   25%

5. **Participation**  
   20%

**TOTAL**  
100%

**Course Requirements**

**Group Presentation**

Each student is expected (together with one or two other students) to lead a 15-minute group presentation of one particular text, topic, or media example. Two weeks 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 s/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 two weeks 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.

**Field Research and Written Analysis**

The course includes two written reflections on two of the field 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 for each includes: a summary that describes the site visited (5%), a reflection on what you felt and learnt during the excursion, particularly in the context of differences from your own culture and experience (5%), a critical examination of culture, nature, nationality—but also, potentially, gender, ethnicity, class (5%). Add at least one picture that you took during the excursion and explain the significance of this image (5%). The PDF file must be submitted by the next class session following the site visit.

**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 discussed in the course. Please note that your project will become part of a final exhibition on your local CIEE campus.

**Take-Home Exam**

The take-home exercise will give students a chance to present what they have learned during this course by answering several short essay questions. Questions will refer to the concepts discussed in class and students should reference practical examples where appropriate (e.g. a painting, an advertisement, a novel, an education campaign, etc.) and at least one (1) scholarly sources in each response.

**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.
Attendance

Regular class attendance is required throughout the program, and all 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, 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 any required field placement. Students may not miss placement/work hours at an internship or service learning site unless approved in advance by the Academic Director and placement supervisor. All students must complete all of the requisite 100 minimum work hours on site at the internship or service learning placement to be eligible for academic credit.

Students who miss class for personal travel, including unforeseen delays that arise as a result of personal travel, will be marked as absent. 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.

Absences for classes will lead to the following penalties:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Total Course Hours Missed</th>
<th>Minimum Penalty</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to 10%</td>
<td>Participation graded as per class requirements</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 – 20%</td>
<td>Participation graded as per class requirements, 3% grade penalty &amp; written warning</td>
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<tr>
<td>More than 20%</td>
<td>Automatic course failure, and possible expulsion</td>
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N.B. Course schedule is subject to change due to study tours, excursions, or local holidays. Final schedules will be included in the final syllabus provided to students on site.

Weekly Schedule

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 mixed-used urban precinct

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:**


**Class: 2.2 Sense of Place; Sense of Planet**

In this class we will analyse the concept of ‘eco-cosmopolitanism’ and the dynamic interdependencies between nature and culture as operating on a global scale, while contrasting this approach to eco-localism theory which has tended to dominate environmentalist movements in the host context.

**Readings:**


**Optional Readings:**


**Week 3**

**Class: 3.1 Site Visit**

The urban community garden and farm offers a unique site to study a community-based horticultural therapy project, which demonstrates concepts such as the cultural significance of food, the restorative and empowering impact of connecting with the food production system, and how community farms and gardens can foster ecological sustainability, partnerships, enterprise, innovation, cultural exchange as well as help to treat people suffering from trauma such as war.

**Reading:**


**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:**


**Optional:**

Take a look at the “Cultures of Consumption Programme.” www.consume.bbk.ac.uk

**Class: 3.3 Site Visit**

We will commute to a nearby housing project, known for its innovative conversion into a sustainable inner-city family dwelling. During the tour, students will explore key design features of the community and the extension of sustainability principles beyond its walls.

**Reading:**
Week 4

Class: 4.1 Animal Rights; Animal Welfare

This session focuses a local initiative that connects humans with animals. Several examples of similar enterprises have emerged in various locations around the world, however this class will analyze the western trend of restaurant, café, bar, bakery and farmers market which also combines a small animal farm, including various birds and chickens, pigs and sometimes other farm animals.

During this class we will consider how we define our relationship with animals and why we consider some to be our friends while others end up on our dinner plates? What is the philosophy behind this, and is there a more ethical, democratic or sustainable approach to consuming animal products or should we all convert to vegetarianism or veganism?

Reading:


Class: 4.2 Rethinking Ecological Crisis

In this session, students will conduct their 15-minute Group Presentations, including class discussion of questions posed by each group.

Readings:


Week 5

Class: 5.1 Site Visit: Natural Landscapes through the Ages

In this session we will take an excursion through some iconic parts of the host environment to explore the role of art in forming our understanding of and relationship with nature, both historically and contemporarily. We will visit several artworks and exhibitions,. During this fieldwork we will critically examine changes in artistic expression of nature from colonization through to the present day and consider differences between western and aboriginal conceptions of nature in art.

Reading:


Class: 5.2 Going Plant Wards: 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 further into art history and poetry, where the plant kingdom has always been alive and thriving.

Reading:


Optional Viewing:

Bill Viola. “Owl—I do not know what it is what I’m like.” (YouTube)

Class: 5.3 Film After Nature
Disaster films belong to the most widely known, creative responses to natural catastrophes and debates on environmental destruction. In this session, we will review a contemporary disaster movie “A Plastic Ocean”, directed by journalist Craig Leeson.

**Reading:**


**Due date for Submission of the Take-Home Exam Assessment**

Week 6
Class: 6.1 The Psychology of Climate Change?

Commonly perceived as a somewhat gritty part of popular culture, graphic novels have become a major source of inspiration for “serious” readers. In this session, we will discuss “Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change” by George Marshall – a novel which explores why, despite overwhelming scientific evidence, we still ignore climate change. It argues that the root of the problem lies in our evolutionary origins, our perceptions of threats, our cognitive blind-spots, our love of storytelling, our fear of death, and our deep instincts to defend family and tribe. We will then consider the potential role that the arts, communications and media can play in overcoming our tendency toward ecological self-destructionism.

**Readings:**


Class: 6.2 Creative Project

During the final session, students will have time to work on their creative projects and the opportunity to seek additional guidance from the lecturer.

**Due Date for Submission of the Final Project Assessment**

**Course Materials**

**Readings**


