

Global Seminar Proposal: Revelle in Berlin

Second summer session 2025



Seminar leader: Todd Kontje, Distinguished Professor of German Literature, Emeritus

Why Berlin? Today's Berlin is the political capital of Germany, the most populous country in Western Europe, home to the world's third-largest GDP (after the United States and China), and a vibrant hub of transnational cultural exchanges. Beneath its surface—bound together by an ecologically friendly network of public transportation—lie layers of history. The Berlin Wall divided the city for decades and became a potent symbol of Cold War tensions between the communist East and the capitalist West. Berlin was the capital of Nazi Germany and the site of the 1936 Olympics, where Jesse Owens made a mockery of Hitler's belief in "Aryan" supremacy. In the late nineteenth century, Berlin became a booming metropolis during Germany's rapid rise to industrial and imperial power. Still earlier, Berlin was a center of the European Enlightenment under the rule of Frederick "the Great," king of Prussia.

This Global Seminar will take full advantage of Berlin's cultural wealth and historical depth, combining classroom instruction with frequent excursions to major museums and monuments. It will consist of two interrelated courses that together will offer an overview of German development in European and global context from the eighteenth century to the present. The first, Revelle Humanities 4, focuses on Enlightenment thought, Romantic art, and revolutionary politics around 1800. The second, LTWL 180: Film Studies and Literature, will explore key moments in modern German history through the lens of literature and film.

Course credit. Both courses fulfil Revelle College's Humanities requirement. The classes can also be counted toward interdisciplinary majors and minors in the School of Arts and the Humanities, including Film Studies, European Studies, and German Studies, the Literature Department's World Literature and Culture program, and the Humanities minor. It should be noted that minors are relatively easy to complete, add breadth to your undergraduate studies, and look good on your resume.

Course Descriptions:

Revelle Humanities 4: Enlightenment, Romanticism, Revolution

This course is the fourth of five in Revelle College's Humanities sequence. We will focus on what is often termed the "long eighteenth century," with readings extending into the first decades of the nineteenth century. During this period the world began to look more like the one we know today, in comparison with periods studied in earlier segments of this sequence.

This is the Age of Enlightenment, when people began to accept facts over faith and science over superstition. The foundations of modern democracy were laid in this period. Kant urged people to think for themselves; the American and French revolutionaries also wanted to govern themselves. We have had enough of kings and queens who rule by the accident of birth, they proclaimed. From now on, we the people will elect our own officials – and vote them out, if we see fit.

While the Enlightenment valued rational thought, the Romantics reminded us that feelings are equally important. Many agreed with Rousseau that human progress had only made individuals unhappy and society corrupt. They discovered a new reverence for nature, and an increasing awareness of how easily its ecosystems can be disrupted. This is also the age of the first industrial revolution and the dawn of the Anthropocene, the period in which humans began to alter the environment – usually not for the better.

Finally, this period is marked by accelerating contacts between Europe and the non-European world, opening up vast regions for settlement and scientific exploration, but also leading to the decimation of indigenous peoples and the inhumanity of slavery. We will be attentive to the tensions between humanistic ideals and human rights abuses during this period – tensions that remain sadly relevant today.

Course Requirements: As in the Humanities classes taught during the regular academic year, students will be required to write two 5-page essays on works read and discussed in class. Attendance and informed contributions to in-class discussions is also mandatory.

"

LTWL 180: Film Studies and Literature. German Film and Literature.

This course focuses on German film of the past century supplemented by selected readings from canonical works of German literature. We will view the films and literary works as artistic responses to historical and social change. Taken together, these works offer a window into the major events of a particularly eventful century: the advent of modernism in the Weimar Republic; the rise of fascism; the aftermath of the Second World War; the nation's division in the Cold War and reunification in its wake; the influx of "guest workers" and the transformation of today's Germany into a multicultural society.

Requirements: In addition to mandatory attendance and participation, students will submit short written responses to readings, films, and excursions and write one final 5-page paper.

Seminar Organization. The two courses will be organized chronologically, beginning with Hum 4 in the first weeks and then moving to LTWL 180 in the remaining time. We will plan busy 4-day workweeks, leaving 3-day weekends for study and personal explorations in and around Berlin. The anticipated 5-week schedule of classroom instruction and excursions is as follows:

Week One. Humanities 4: The Enlightenment

Monday – The Enlightenment, Court culture, enlightened despotism, Rococo art

Tuesday – Voltaire’s visit to King Frederick II (“the Great”) in Berlin; *Candide*
Afternoon: Excursion to Charlottenburg Palace <https://www.spsg.de/en/palaces-gardens/object/charlottenburg-palace-old-palace/>

Wednesday – Heinrich von Kleist. Prussian aristocrat, Romantic writer, Enlightenment skeptic. Short Story: “Earthquake in Chile”

Thursday – Day-long excursion to Potsdam, Sans Souci Palace, park grounds, New Palace, with stop at Kleist’s grave at the Wannsee Lake
<https://www.spsg.de/en/palaces-gardens/object/sanssouci-palace/>

Week Two. Humanities 4: Romanticism

Monday – Rousseau, *Origins of Inequality*

Tuesday – Goethe, *Werther*
Caspar David Friedrich, paintings

Wednesday – Goethe, *Werther*
Excursion: Alte Nationalgalerie (Old National Gallery) (19th-century art)
<https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/alte-nationalgalerie/home/>
Focus: German Romantic Painting

Thursday – The French Revolution
Excursion: German Historical Museum <https://www.dhm.de/>

Week Three. Part One. Humanities 4: Romanticism

Monday – Shelley, *Frankenstein*

Tuesday – Shelley, *Frankenstein*

Part Two. Film Studies and Literature: The Nineteenth Century

Wednesday – Discussion of *Effi Briest* (1974) by Rainer Maria Fassbinder

Thursday – Realism and Impressionism in the visual arts

Excursion: Museum Barberini, Potsdam

<https://www.museum-barberini.de/en/>

Week Four. Film Studies and Literature: From Modernism to National Socialism

Monday – Kafka, “The Judgment” and shorter works

Expressionism in modernist art

Tuesday – discussion of film *Metropolis* (1927), director Fritz Lang

Excursion: Neue Nationalgalerie (New National Gallery). Focus: Expressionism

<https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/neue-nationalgalerie/home/>

Wednesday – discussion of film excerpts *Triumph of the Will* (1935) by Leni Riefenstahl

Excursion: “Berlin 1933-1945”. Permanent exhibit at Topography of Terror

Museum <https://www.topographie.de/en/exhibitions/berlin-1933-1945>

Thursday – discussion of film, *Nowhere in Africa* (2001) by Caroline Link

Excursion: walking visit to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe

<https://www.stiftung-denkmal.de/en/>

Week Five. Film Studies and Literature: National Reunification, Global Connections

Monday – discussion of film *Goodbye Lenin* (2003) by Wolfgang Becker

Tuesday – discussion of film *The Lives of Others* (2006) by Florian Henckel von
Donnersmarck

Excursion: Berlin Wall Memorial <https://www.stiftung-berliner-mauer.de/en/berlin-wall-memorial>

Wednesday – Zafer Senocak, *Atlas of a Tropical Germany* (selected essays)

Thursday – discussion of film *Goodbye Berlin* [Tschick](2016) by Fatih Akin

Excursion: “Berlin Global.” Permanent exhibition at the Humboldt Forum

<https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/programm/dauerangebot/exhibition/berlin-global-16471/>