

## Ecocriticism in German Studies Key Publications and Current Themes

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### 1. The emergence of ecocriticism in German Studies

- **Definitions:** My understanding of 'Ecocriticism' is that it is the study of literary and cultural representations of nature/ environment and our relationship with them: it consists of description, analysis, evaluation and theorisation. It is an issue-driven approach comparable to the study of class, gender and race in culture. Ecocriticism was initially a reaction against the dominance of theories focused on inner-textual relations in literary studies, with its orientation towards the outside world, and inclined towards conservationism (advocating the preservation of wilderness. It developed in different directions, overlapping with feminist and postcolonial studies in ecofeminism and environmental justice, and with other traditional theoretical approaches (genre theory, narratology) and with emerging ones: queer theory, biosemiotics, posthumanism, cultural animal studies.
- **Conferences and edited volumes:** Germanists working in America, Britain and Australia (Jost Hermand, Colin Riordan, Axel Goodbody, Kate Rigby) were among the first to study contemporary German environmental writing and begin re-examining German cultural tradition from an ecological perspective. In Germany, interest in the ecocritical debates, arguments, concepts & theories generated in the USA and Britain by Buell, Murphy, Bate, Slovic and others from the early 1990s on began among American Studies scholars. The 2 groups came together at a planning meeting in Bonn convened by Hannes Bergthaller and a conference in Münster organised by Sylvia Mayer in 2004, at which a European branch of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) was founded (EASLCE). 2 edited volumes emerged from this conference, one in German, the other in English: Gersdorf/ Mayer (ed.), *Natur - Kultur - Text: Beiträge zu Ökologie und Literaturwissenschaft* (2005) and Gersdorf/ Mayer (ed.), *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism* (2006). A couple of years later, again 2 vols emerged from the next EASLCE conference, which was held in Austria: Goodbody/ Wanning (ed.), *Wasser - Kultur - Ökologie: Beiträge zum Wandel im Umgang mit dem Wasser und zu seiner literarischen Imagination*; Devine/ Grewe-Volpp (ed.), *Words on Water: Literary and Cultural Representations*. Colleagues working in literature departments in Germany gradually began to take note, Heinrich Detering in Göttingen being one of the first. Since then there have been a growing number of workshops, seminars and conferences on aspects of German ecocriticism. From 2010 on special numbers of journals on literary and cultural studies have appeared, including some in German Studies (*Colloquia*

*Germanica, Ecozona, Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie, Komparatistik Online, Philologie im Netz, New German Critique, Literatur für Leser*).

- **Introductions to ecocriticism:** 4 book publications 2015-2017 mark the arrival of ecocriticism in German academia. In *Ecocriticism: Eine Einführung* Dürbeck and Stobbe assembled 21 chapters written in German, by German, American and European experts. The book is an excellent introduction to the main ecocritical theories, methodologies, genres and themes, with some chapters examining aspects of German literature. In *Ecocriticism: Grundlagen - Theorien – Interpretationen*, Benjamin Bühler locates ecocriticism in the broad field of humanities research and presents a brief history of German literature from an ecological perspective through short studies of individual works. Schmitt and Solte-Gresser's ambitious and weighty volume, *Literatur und Ökologie. Neue literatur- und kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven* includes a comprehensive introduction to ecocriticism for scholars of comparative literature, and 40 chapters in three languages. Hubert Zapf's *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology* was published in a series for students of English and American Studies. However, the 34 essays it contains include a piece by Gernot Böhme setting out his nature aesthetics, a chapter using Niklas Luhmann's social theory, and an introduction to cultural animal studies focused on Kafka's stories.
- **Research projects and institutions:** DFG and Humboldt Foundation-funded projects include 'Ethik und Ästhetik in literarischen Repräsentationen ökologischer Transformationen', 'Zeit des Klimas. Zur Verzeitlichung von Natur in der literarischen Moderne', 'Environmental Crises and the Transnational Imagination', and the Transatlantic Humboldt Research Network in Environmental Humanities led by Sabine Wilke in Seattle. The most important institution is the Rachel Carson Center in Munich, a unique (and uniquely well funded) centre of multidisciplinary environmental research co-directed by Christoph Mauch of the University of Munich and Helmuth Trischler of the Deutsches Museum. The Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS) also supports research in the environmental humanities.
- **Public interest:** Meanwhile student interest is demonstrated by the growing number of Masters theses and PhDs on environmental fiction and films, and linguistic or discourse analysis studies of environment in the media and politics. And the growing public interest today is reflected in Matthes & Seitz's remarkably successful *Naturkunden* series (65 vols to date, consisting of reprints and translations, but also of new writing), and the Preis für Nature Writing which they co-sponsor with the Bundesamt für Naturschutz. (See also the Oekom Verlag's *Stoffgeschichten* series, edited by the philosopher Jens Soentgen.)

In a moment, I will go into more detail on the subjects discussed in German ecocriticism. But to avoid this paper becoming a mere list of book titles, I'd like to note that ecocriticism has yet to become fully accepted as a part of mainstream literary studies in Germany, and to ask why this is the case. Ecocritics have been appointed to chairs in American Studies (e.g. in Augsburg, Bayreuth, Konstanz, Würzburg), to Media Studies in Freiburg, to Literature Didactics in Cologne, Siegen and Tübingen, and to German literature since the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Frankfurt. But as yet no positions are specifically dedicated to ecocriticism. In contrast, there have

been chairs in environmental history and environmental ethics in Germany since the 1980s.

2. Why has ecocriticism been slow to gain acceptance in mainstream German literary studies, and with what consequences?

- In the past, I have argued this is because of ideological abstinence: the reluctance of German humanities scholars since the Second World War to focus on the ideologically burdened subject of nature, and to link their work with overtly political causes. Also, that it derives from the very success of the environmental movement in Germany – some of whose popular manifestations have been questionable. But this would apply to the German humanities in general, rather than just ecocriticism. 2 other things are probably equally important:
- Fragmentation of the field – ecocritical research being conducted in 2 different languages – with the consequence that the terms and concepts which serve as tools aren't always shared. Along with the 2 languages go different ways of categorising things, concepts and theories. The absence of a unifying term for environmentally orientated research ('ecocriticism' vs. 'ökologisch orientierte Literaturwissenschaft') is symptomatic. 'Sense of place' and 'pastoral', 'country' and 'Georgic' are common English terms which don't have an equivalent in German with the same historical, political and aesthetic connotations. On the other hand, there have been home-grown ecologically orientated studies of literature and culture in Germany since the 1980s. These often examined literary texts together with non-fiction as documents of *Ideengeschichte*: Jost Hermand's *Grüne Utopien in Deutschland*, Wolfgang Kaiser's *Mutter Natur und die Dampfmaschine* and Hartmut Böhme's *Natur und Subjekt* are examples. Germany has of course a strong native tradition of ecological thinking, going back to early modern nature philosophy, eighteenth-century aesthetics, Goethe, the Romantics, Humboldt, Haeckel, the Frankfurt School, Heidegger's critique of technology, Hans Jonas's ethics of responsibility and Klaus Meyer-Abich's environmental ethics. Much of this thinking falls outside what is normally thought of as 'ecocriticism'.
- German precursors in studying environmental literature and the disparate terminologies across the field mean that German work is less focused and cohesive. However, being able to draw on different national experiences and traditions of thought can be an advantage. German ecocritics have enriched Anglophone discourse by coming at environmental literature from a different perspective and adapting and applying alternative strands of cultural and literary theory.
- Another reason why ecocriticism has yet to become a mainstream practice in Germany is the relatively modest role of literary writing in developing new understandings of nature in Germany. German thinkers have arguably dominated nature philosophy. And there has been a strong tradition of German nature poetry since the eighteenth century: unsurprisingly, people working on this (Egyptien, Ertl, Detering) were among the first Germanisten to show interest in ecocriticism. (Scholars of East German literature were a second group, because of the role played by environmental issues in the work of GDR authors.) But Germany lacks a tradition of nature writing comparable to that in the USA, where Thoreau and others have played a key part in shaping national identity. Its role is largely taken by non-fiction, essays and

popular science writing. In this sense it is logical that literary criticism doesn't play the leading role in environmental research in the humanities in Germany.

- Here again, however, a problem can emerge as a potential advantage. The subordinate position of literary study in the German environmental humanities has prompted a good deal of multi- and cross-disciplinary work. The volume *Ecological Thought in German Literature and Culture*, ed. by Dürbeck, Stobbe, Zapf and Zemanek (2017), contains essays on theory, history, painting, film, music, art and landscape architecture as well as literature. History plays the leading role in the Rachel Carson Center, but they offer fellowships to literary scholars to work alongside sociologists, anthropologists, geographers and lawyers. Similarly, Sabine Wilke's Transatlantic Humboldt-Research Network of Scholars in the Environmental Humanities, and the Vienna Anthropozän-Forum led by Eva Horn comprise a mix of disciplines. Such work in German Studies makes an important contribution to the human-sciences interdisciplinarity under the umbrella of the environmental humanities which was first called for in Australia, and has gradually gained momentum in the USA, Britain and Scandinavia over the past twenty years. Genuine inter-, as opposed to mere multi-disciplinarity, remains fraught with problems. However, some scholars (e.g. Bergthaller) draw freely on philosophy and contribute to it, while others (including Heise, Schmitt, Wagner and Zemanek) work across languages and cultures. Weik von Mossner works on both literature and film, while Wilke (*German Culture and the Modern Environmental Imagination*) and Heidenreich bridge the gap between literature, art, aesthetics and ethics.

Back now to the main themes addressed in German ecocritical research.

### 3. Main areas of research

Themes:

- disaster and risk narratives: Dürbeck (ed.), 'Writing Catastrophes: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on the Semantics of Natural and Anthropogenic Disasters' (*Ecozon* @ 2012); Gerstenberger/ Nusser (ed.), *Catastrophe and Catharsis: Perspectives on Disaster and Redemption in German Culture and Beyond* (2015); Horn, *Zukunft als Katastrophe* (2015); Rigby, *Dancing with Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (2015); Schaumann/ Sullivan (ed.), 'Catastrophe, Crisis, and Cultural Exploitation' section in *German Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene* (2017)
- genre and narratology: E. Zemanek (ed.), *Ökologische Genres: Naturästhetik – Umweltethik – Wissenspoetik* (2018); S. Schröder, *The Nature Essay. Ecocritical Explorations* (2019)
- the Anthropocene: Scherer/ Renn (ed.), *Das Anthropozän. Zum Stand der Dinge* (2015); Bayer/ Seel (ed.), *Lyrik im Anthropozän* (2016), Schaumann/ Sullivan (ed.), *German Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene* (2017); Wilke/ Johnstone (ed.), *Readings in the Anthropocene: The Environmental Humanities, German Studies, and Beyond* (2017); Dürbeck / Nesselhauf (ed.), *Repräsentationsweisen des Anthropozän in Literatur und Medien* (2018); Hüpkes/ Dürbeck (ed.), *Narratives of*

- Scale in the Anthropocene* (2020); Bergthaller/ Horn, *Anthropozän. Zur Einführung* (2019). Projects include Dürbeck's DFG-Network 'Narrative des Anthropozän in Wissenschaft und Literatur' (2016-19).
- literature didactics (where 'active learning' of environmental knowledge is a central concept): Bartosch/ Grimm (ed.), *Teaching Environments: Ecocritical Encounters* (2014); Grimm/ Wanning (ed.), *Kulturökologie und Literaturdidaktik. Beiträge zur ökologischen Herausforderung in Literatur und Unterricht* (2016); Grimm/ Bartosch (ed.), *Die Materie des Geistes: Der material turn im Kontext von Bildungs- und Literaturgeschichte um 1800* (2018); Bartosch/ Hoydis (ed.), *Teaching the Posthuman* (2019); Bartosch, *Literature, Pedagogy, and Climate Change: Text Models for a Transcultural Ecology* (2020)
- risk: Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet. The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008); Zemanek, 'Unkalkulierbare Risiken und ihre Nebenwirkungen. Zu literarischen Reaktionen auf ökologische Transformationen und den Chancen des Ecocriticism', in: Schmitz-Emans et al. (ed.), *Literatur als Wagnis/ Literature as Risk* (2012); Mayer/ Weik von Mossner (ed.), *The Anticipation of Catastrophe. Environmental Risk in North American Literature and Culture* (2014); Hoydis, *Risk and the English Novel: From Defoe to McEwan* (2019)
- sustainability: Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts* (2016); Meireis/ Rippl (ed.), *Cultural Sustainability: Perspectives from the Humanities and Social Sciences* (2018); Kluwick/ Zemanek (ed.), *Nachhaltigkeit – interdisziplinär. Konzepte, Diskurse, Praktiken: Ein Kompendium* (2019); Heidenreich, *Wunschlandschaften. Bilder vom guten Leben und die Utopie der Nachhaltigkeit* (2019)
- animal studies: J. Ullrich (ed.), *Ökologie (Tierstudien 2018)*; R. Borgards (ed.), *Tiere. Kulturwissenschaftliches Handbuch* (2016); Middelhoff/ Schönbeck/ Borgards/ Gersdorf (ed.), *Texts, Animals, Environments: Zoopoetics and Eco-poetics* (2019)
- posthumanism and ecological materialism: Goll/ Keil/ Telios (ed.), *Critical Matter. Diskussionen eines neuen Materialismus* (2013); Stobbe/ Dürbeck/ Nesselhauf (ed.), *Helden, ambivalente Protagonisten und nicht-menschliche Agenzien. Zur Figurendarstellung in umweltbezogener Literatur (Komparatistik online 2015)*; Sullivan/ Malkmus (ed.), *The Challenge of Ecology to the Humanities: Posthumanism or Humanism? (New German Critique 2016)*; Novero/ Obermayer/ Barton (ed.), *Of Rocks, Mushrooms and Animals: Material Ecocriticism in German-speaking Cultures (Otago German Studies 2017)*
- energy humanities: Sullivan, 'Material Ecocriticism and the Petro-Text', and Bergthaller, 'Fossil Freedoms: The Politics of Emancipation and the End of Oil', in *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* (2017); Bergthaller/ Grewe-Volpp/ Mayer (ed.), *Petrofiction (Green Letters 2019)*
- climate change fiction: Mehnert, *Climate Change Fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American Literature* (2016); section 'New Approaches to Climate Fiction' in Löschnigg/ Braunecker (ed.), *Green Matters: Ecocultural Functions of Literature* (2020)

Approaches:

- Literature as a medium of Cultural Ecology (Hubert Zapf)
- Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory (Stefan Hofer, Hannes Bergthaller)
- Contributions to risk theory, globalisation theory, genre and transnational ecocriticism (Ursula Heise)

In terms of authors and periods, to date, German ecocriticism has focused mainly on contemporary writing, but there is a growing body of work on Goethe, the Romantics, and 19th-century novels, and a little on medieval literature.

#### 4. Where does this leave us?

The sheer number of recent publications suggests there is a lively interest in German ecocriticism today: Dürbeck/ Kanz/ Zschachlitz (ed.) *Ökologischer Wandel in der deutschen Literatur des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts – neue Perspektiven und Ansätze* (2018); Ludwig Fischer, *Natur im Sinn: Naturwahrnehmung und Literatur* (2019); Detering, *Menschen im Weltgarten: Die Entdeckung der Ökologie in der Literatur von Haller bis Humboldt* (2020); Rigby, *Reclaiming Romanticism: Towards an Ecopoetics of Decolonization* (2020); and Dürbeck/ Hüpkes (ed.) *The Anthropocenic Turn: The Interplay between Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Responses to a New Age* (2020). Forthcoming titles include: Kramer/ Stobbe/ Wanning (ed.) *Pflanzen und Literatur*; Dürbeck/ Hüpkes (ed.) *Narratives of Scale in the Anthropocene. Imagining Human Responsibility in an Age of Scalar Complexity*; Mattfeldt/ Schwegler/ Wanning (ed.) *Natur, Umwelt, Nachhaltigkeit – Perspektiven auf Sprache, Diskurse und Kultur*; and Dürbeck/ Kanz (ed.) *Deutschsprachiges Nature Writing von Goethe bis zur Gegenwart – Kontroversen, Positionen, Perspektiven*.

Areas of future potential are likely to include:

- affect studies and empirical ecocriticism (Weik von Mossner)
- plant studies (Stobbe)
- nature writing (from Humboldt to Fontane and Ernst Jünger)
- intermediality/ comparative media studies (Zemanek)
- intercultural ecocriticism: comparisons offer new insights into both content and form of literary works

In conclusion: German ecocriticism may not yet be a mainstream activity, but it is a rapidly growing, lively field of research which promises to be rewarding for British and American Germanists.

#### 5. Published overviews of German ecocriticism

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Gabriele Dürbeck, Christa Grewe-Volpp, Anna-Marie Humbert, Urte Stobbe and Alexa Weik von Mossner, who kindly answered questions when I was preparing this overview, and am indebted to the authors of three recent survey articles, which I recommend warmly for further information:

- Helga Braunbeck's thorough review essay, focusing on 7 publications: 'Recent German Ecocriticism in Interdisciplinary Context' (*Monatshefte* 2019)
- Aurélie Choné's comparison of ecocritical work in France and Germany, in a special number on environmental humanities and the circulation and renewal

of knowledge in the two countries: ‚Ecocriticism/ Écocritique im deutschen und französischen Kontext: eine vergleichende Perspektive‘ (*Revue d'Allemagne* 2019)

- Anne-Marie Humbert’s review essay, looking at some more recent work and reflecting on the characteristics of German ecocriticism: ‚Ecocriticism in German Literary Studies‘ (*Ecozon* @ 2020).