

# Environmental Humanities *meets* History of Knowledge

Workshop / 20-21 November / Uni Konstanz

## ■ Program ■

### 20 Nov, 17:00 - 18:45, Room F427

17:00 Welcome and Introduction (Anne Kwaschik and Timo Müller, UKon)

**17:15 – 18:45 Keynote** by **Florian Sprenger**, Uni Bochum

**Response** by Beate Ochsner (UKon) and **Discussion**

19:30 Dinner at [Glorious Bastards](#) on LAGO rooftop

### 21 Nov, 10:00 - 18:15, Room H308

**10:00 – 11:30 Keynote** by **Stephanie Zehnle**, Uni Passau

11:30 – 11:45 Coffee Break

**11:45 – 13:15 1st Session:** Gilberto Mazzoli and Jonathan Stafford

13:15 – 14:30 Lunch Break

**14:30 – 16:00 2nd Session:** Ateş Uslu and Marthe Kretzschmar

16:00 – 16:30 Coffee Break

**16:30 – 17:15 3rd Session:** Patrick Stoffel

17:15 – 17:30 Break

17:30 – 18:15 Closing Discussion

The keynote lectures will be held in a hybrid format. Online participation requires prior registration (Anna Schiminski, [hiwis.kwaschik@uni-konstanz.de](mailto:hiwis.kwaschik@uni-konstanz.de))

## ■ List of Participants ■

**Marthe Kretzschmar**, University of Konstanz

*Perceiving Deep Time in the French Landscape Garden: White Marble Sculpture, Artificial Grottoes, and a Spatiotemporal Trajectory*

During the second half of the 18th century, several French gardens were redesigned in the style of English landscape gardens, transforming natural spaces in order to create picturesque scenes and atmospheres; these were sites where daytime and the seasons were incorporated, becoming important factors of the stylized display. At the same time, some certainties of traditional natural history also came to be transformed, among them, the understanding of geological deep time. This paper brings together both of these phenomena from an art historical perspective. Using the example of the Bosquet des Bains d'Apollon (1778-1781) in the park of the Palace of Versailles, the scope for interpretation will be discussed against the backdrop of contemporary natural history, highlighting various aspects of temporality, movement, and iconography.

### *Bio*

Marthe Kretzschmar is an art historian, currently conducting research at the University of Konstanz (Fachgruppe Kunstwissenschaft) as part of a DFG grant (Independent Position) on the materiality of marble in 18th-century French sculpture within the context of the mineralogical and geological knowledge of the time. Previously, she worked at the art history institutes of the Universities of Vienna and Stuttgart, and as Coordinator of the DFG Research Training Group Art and Technology at the Technical University of Hamburg. She has received research grants from the German Forum for Art History in Paris, and the Gerda Henkel Foundation. Since completing her PhD thesis, *Herrscherbilder aus Wachs* (University of Stuttgart, published in 2014), she has focused on material-related questions in art history. Her current research centers on ecological perspectives within the DFG-funded network Ecologies of Marble, which she co-initiated.

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**Gilberto Mazzoli**, University of Konstanz

*Mapping Collisions: Roadkill and Mobile Environmental Knowledge in the US, 1924-1943*

This project investigates the impact the rise of automobiles had on the ecological sciences and on the production of new environmental knowledge in the United States. This project, part of the ERC project “Off the Road: The Environmental Aesthetics of Early Automobility” at the University of Konstanz, explores two main and related areas: field science and roadkill. Spanning from the introduction of cars in 1895 to the Wilderness Act of 1964, this research explores how automobiles revolutionized field science by enabling ecologists, botanists, zoologists, geologists, and agriculturalists to access remote areas quickly, transforming field practices and knowledge production. For example, cars allowed zoologists to measure bird flight speeds and botanists to understand vegetation patterns through extensive travel. The project also examines roadkill, highlighting how the advent of motorcars led to new encounters between humans and wildlife. Natural scientists began studying vehicle-induced

wildlife mortality, influencing road construction and the development of wildlife crossings and road signs. In this presentation we will focus on this latter aspect and on the years that spans from 1924 when the zoologist Dayton Stoner made the first trip to count roadkill (he published a paper in 1925), until 1943 when, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term roadkill – which is currently used to describe such deadly collisions - has been used for the first time in a scientific publication. Through the mapping of many of the road trips made by scientists this paper aims to highlight the extent of the contribution automobile gave to enhance the knowledge about the environment in the United States.

#### *Bio*

Gilberto Mazzoli is post-doctoral scholar in North American Environmental History at the University of Konstanz, on the ERC funded project “Off the Road: the environmental aesthetics of early automobility”. Gilberto holds a PhD in Modern History from the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. His dissertation, titled “Portable Natures”, is an environmental history of the Italian migratory experience to the US with a focus on gardening as a resilient migrants’ practice and as a political tool used to manage migratory flows. The manuscript of “Portable Natures” is currently under contract with University of Pittsburgh Press. Gilberto has been visiting fellow at the European Institute of the Columbia University, NYC, in 2019, and PhD Fellow at the IEG Leibniz Institute for European History in Mainz, in 2022. His current project of environmental history, titled “Collisions”, investigates the encounters between automobiles and animals in the United States in the early 20th century and the impact that the rise of automobiles had on the production of environmental knowledge.

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**Beate Ochsner**, University of Konstanz

#### *Bio*

Prof. Dr. Beate Ochsner has been a Professor of Media Studies at the University of Konstanz since 2008. Since 2022, she serves as the Deputy Director of the Centre for Human | Data | Society. From 2015 to 2022, she was the spokesperson for the DFG Research Group 2252 “Mediale Teilhabe.” Her research focuses on media participation, dis/ability and media studies, serious gaming, and audiovisual practices. She has contributed extensively to scholarship on digital hearing systems, gaming, and media infrastructures. Her selected recent publications include: *Negotiating contingency: between personalisation and customisation in digital hearing systems, Sound Studies*, 2025. [DOI](#); *Disability and Video Games*, MacMillan, 2024 (with M. Spöhrer), and the forthcoming: Ochsner, B. et al., 2025. “It Is a Dangerous Time for Democracies’: On Why We Need to Take Social Media and Generative AI Seriously,” in *Routledge Handbook of Social Media, Law and Society*, Routledge.

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**Florian Sprenger**, University of Bochum

#### ***Why write the history of ecology? From ecological relations to environmental technologies***

This talk examines the intersection of the history of ecological knowledge and contemporary technologies of environmentality through the example of autonomous machines. Drawing on the relationality of surroundings, it traces how historical notions

such as environment and Umwelt inform present-day technologies that sense, model, and adapt to their surroundings. Using the self-built robot LoW (LiDAR on Wheels) as a case study, the talk investigates how robotic systems generate probabilistic world models that enable them to act under uncertainty. These virtual environments reveal how machines produce their own versions of the world through sensing and computation. Adopting a Foucauldian genealogical approach, the talk argues that ecology has never been purely natural but always hybrid, technical, and political. It shows how current adaptive and resilient technologies translate ecological concepts into operational logics, reshaping our understanding of autonomy, mediation, and the technopolitical production of environments.

### *Bio*

Prof. Dr. Florian Sprenger is a scholar specializing in media studies and philosophy, currently serving as Professor of Virtual Humanities at the Institute for Media Studies at Ruhr University Bochum. Since April 2020, he has led the Virtual Humanities Lab, focusing on the intersection of media, technology, and culture. Sprenger's research interests encompass the history of artificial environments, media of immediacy, and the Internet of Things. He is the author of *Politics of Micro-Decisions: Edward Snowden, Net Neutrality, and the Architecture of the Internet* (Meson Press, 2015). His work critically examines how digital technologies shape contemporary life and governance. In addition to his academic roles, Sprenger has been involved in various fellowships and collaborative research projects, including the DFG Graduate School "Configurations of Film" and the Australian Research Council's project on data centers and labor governance. He is an active member of several scholarly associations, including the Society for Media Studies and the European Network for Cinema and Media Studies (NECS). Sprenger also contributes to the academic community through editorial roles in journals such as *Media Theory* and the book series *Future Ecologies* published by Meson Press.

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**Jonathan Stafford**, University of Konstanz

### ***From Mud to Macadam: Mapping the automotive ecology of Frederic and Edith Clements***

This paper explores to what extent automobility and the roadscape could be seen as formative epistemic infrastructures for early twentieth-century American ecology. Drawing on the plant ecologist husband and wife team Frederic and Edith Clements' use of the automobile as a tool of research, it considers the role of mobility in ecological practice and thought. As the title of Edith's memoir *Adventures in Ecology: Half a Million Miles... From Mud to Macadam* (1960), suggests, the Clements' research involved extensive regional surveys covering vast distances by car, carried out on an automotive infrastructure still undergoing development. The various trials, delays, and accidents of these journeys underscore the natural landscape's ability to destabilize the technological apparatus of the scientific expedition.

As I will explore, the embodied practices of early motoring were rhetorically folded into ecological thought. Automobiles also served as mobile laboratories: cars carried typewriters, cameras, and field instruments, compressing the temporal practices of data collection and facilitating rapid, comparative surveys. At the same time, highways themselves became sites of ecological management, where roadside plantings and

erosion control schemes translated botanical knowledge into infrastructural stability. By situating ecological research within the material practices of its production, this analysis shows how roads operated as both constraints and affordances of environmental knowledge. It also foregrounds Edith Clements' underacknowledged technical contributions as driver, photographer, and field assistant. While making no claims for a simple causal link, the analysis tentatively suggests that automobility was among the conditions that informed the scale, metaphors, and applied practices of American ecology in the first half of the twentieth century.

#### *Bio*

Jonathan Stafford is Assistant Professor at the Department of Literature, Art and Media Studies, University of Konstanz. Working at the intersections of cultural history, critical theory, and visual culture, his research is concerned with technologies of mobility in their social, cultural and environmental contexts, characterised by a sustained interest in the visual and cultural history of the sea and maritime technologies. He is a researcher on the project 'Off the Road: The Environmental Aesthetics of Early Automobility', working on the cultural history of automobility in early twentieth-century America. This research investigates how infrastructure, breakdown, and movement shaped ways of perceiving and inhabiting the natural world during a period of rapid technological and environmental change. His 2023 book, *Imperial Steam: Modernity on the Sea Route to India* documents the 19th-century introduction of steamship travel to Britain's eastern empires, a shift embedded in a discursive nexus of technology, modernity, nature, and the global.

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**Patrick Stoffel**, Leuphana University Lüneburg

#### *History becomes Ecology*

In the early works of writer H.G. Wells from the 1890s, the protagonists constantly lose control over their living conditions. In the first decades of the 20th century, Wells turns his attention to the newly emerging science of ecology. With its help, his later works transform the loss of control described in his early works into visions of seemingly unlimited feasibility and control. In this context, Wells' acquaintance with the zoologist Julian Huxley is interesting. They met when Huxley moved from Oxford to King's College in London in 1925. Together, they wrote 'The Science of Life' in 1929/30, which was reprinted many times over the years and translated into numerous languages. Until the 1950s, it was a widely read standard work in basic biology courses and had an enormous influence on the British public and their perception of ecology in particular. Ecology is presented as the science that promises to shape all natural conditions to the advantage of the human species: 'Life Under Control'. This vision of unlimited ecological feasibility and control goes so far that Wells finally concludes in 'The Fate of Man' (1939) that humans could leave the often cruel and changing history of life behind them once and for all: 'History Becomes Ecology'. The key to this lies in actively shaping the environment.

#### *Bio*

Patrick Stoffel studied comparative literature and philosophy in Bochum and is currently a postdoctoral researcher at Leuphana University Lüneburg in the Department of History and Literary Cultures. His current research focuses on the

staging of Earth's history in the 19th century, the history of ecology, and the cultural history of the Anthropocene. Previous research projects have taken him to the University of Bonn, the Sorbonne in Paris, the University of Florence, and the Alfried Krupp Wissenschaftskolleg in Greifswald.

### *Readings*

For further reading, I am including an excerpt from Huxley's review of Wells' novel 'Men Like Gods' (1923) in the journal 'Nature' ('Biology in Utopia', 1926); a short excerpt from Charles Elton's 'Animal Ecology' (1927) edited by Huxley; Elton was a student of Huxley's; together they went on an expedition to Spitsbergen in 1921, which was to shape both their understanding of ecology; and an excerpt from 'The Science of Life' (1931), including 'The Science of Ecology §1' and 'Life Under Control'.

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**Ateş Uslu**, University of Konstanz

### **Reconsidering Nature: Lukács's Ontological Turn and Its Contemporary Relevance**

In his later works throughout the 1960s, Georg Lukács sought to develop an ontological framework for the critical study of society. The result was *The Ontology of Social Being*, a monumental and posthumous work that revisited the question of the relationship between nature and society. Lukács conceived this project as an alternative to two dominant tendencies: the marginalization of nature within Western critical theory, and the naturalistic reductionism characteristic of much Eastern European Marxist literature on the dialectics of nature. The present paper aims to situate Lukács's ideas on the relationship between nature and society within the broader intellectual debates of the mid-20th century and to discuss their relevance and limitations in the context of contemporary philosophical discussions on ecology. To this end, I intend to put Lukács's ontological emergentism into dialogue with contemporary critical realism, with eco-socialism (primarily Ted Benton, John Bellamy Foster, and Kohei Saito), and with political ecology (Bruno Latour).

### *Bio*

Ateş Uslu is a historian of political thought, who graduated from the International Relations Department of Galatasaray University. He earned his master's degree in History from Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne University. He completed his doctoral studies through a joint program between the same university and Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest. In 2014, he joined the Faculty of Political Science at Istanbul University, where he earned the title of Associate Professor in the field of political thought. He was promoted to full professor in 2023. During the 2024-2025 academic year, he was a visiting researcher at the Chair for Social Philosophy (Prof. Rahel Jaeggi) at Humboldt University in Berlin. He is working on a sabbatical research project titled Political Implications of György Lukács's Ontology of Social Being. Beginning in October 2025, he continues his research on Lukács's political philosophy in his later years (1956–1971) at the Chair of the History of Knowledge at the University of Konstanz as a guest researcher. In addition to his articles in various journals and books on the history of political thought, cultural history, and political history, he is the author of three books in Turkish: *Lukács: The Road to Marx* (2006), *Introduction to the*



*History of Political Thought: Historiography, Core Approaches, and Research Methods* (2017), and *The Social History of Political Thought* (3 volumes, 2021).

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**Stephanie Zehnle**, University of Passau

***“Jungle Bells”: Ecology, Metallurgy and Secrecy in Colonial Sound History***

This presentation traces the entangled history of bells in Africa since 1500 as a case study in the intersection of environmental history, sonic history and the history of knowledge. From the metallurgical expertise of Benin’s guilds and the spiritual ecologies of initiation societies to the reformist prohibitions of Islamic elites in Sokoto, bells were bound to contested epistemologies of sound, ritual, and authority, as well as to forms of *Nichtwissen* – the deliberate silencing or withholding of knowledge. The arrival of European church bells with Christian missions intensified these conflicts, creating new sonic hierarchies that pitted indigenous ecologies, soundscapes, and secret knowledge against missionary claims of civilization and colonial order. Bells became instruments through which competing regimes of knowledge – oral, material, ritual, and textual – were negotiated, appropriated, or erased. Their later displacement into colonial and missionary museums epitomized the epistemic violence of collection practices, transforming sounding instruments into silent objects of display. By following bells across forests, forges, churches, and museums, sound objects uncover broader dynamics of knowledge production and environmental engagement in African colonial history.

*Bio*

Stephanie Zehnle is Professor for Umwelt- und Technikgeschichte (Environmental & Technology History) at the University of Passau since 2023. Her research spans global history, African history, environmental and human-animal relations, history of science & zoology, colonial knowledge regimes, and visual culture—including map-making, comics, and collections as historical sources. Among her main publications are: *A Geography of Jihad. Sokoto Jihadism and the Islamic Frontier in West Africa* (2020); *Zwischen Tätern und Opfern. Gewaltbeziehungen und Gewaltgemeinschaften* (2017) (with Philipp Batelka & Michael Weise).

*Readings*

Coates, Peter A. “The Strange Stillness of the Past: Toward an Environmental History of Sound and Noise.” *Environmental History*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2005, pp. 636–65. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3986142>.