



A Berlin ABC of German Romanticism, 1796-1848

Summer Semester 2026: 13 April– 17 July 2026

CATEGORY

Literature and Film

COURSE STRUCTURE

2 contact hours à 45 min per week (summer semester: 14 weeks)

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Time

Wednesday, 14-16h c.t. (14:15 pm -15.45 pm)

Place

Hausvogteiplatz 5-7, room 0323-26

COURSE LANGUAGE

English

Language requirements (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages)

English B2 - German A2

Instruction language is English. Written assignments may be submitted in English, German, or French.

TARGET GROUP

International exchange students of all subjects with a strong interest in the course topic. Berlin Perspectives courses are designed for undergraduate students. Master students may participate if their home university agrees. Regular degree-seeking students can select the course within the elective part of their study program (überfachlicher Wahlpflichtbereich üWP).

Students interested in literary studies, aesthetic theory, philosophy, cultural studies, and in the intersection of these fields are encouraged to take this course.

CREDITS = 5 ECTS

The Berlin Perspectives courses are offered by the Career Center as part of the elective program üWP. Registration takes place via Agnes.

All courses are accredited according to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

From the 1790s to the 1840s, a Berlin-based network of artists and intellectuals developed novel ways of writing, thinking, feeling, and living under the conceptual banner of the 'romantic.' Drawing on key texts by Ludwig Tieck, Friedrich and Dorothea Schlegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Novalis, Henriette Herz, Rahel Levin Varnhagen, Bettina and Achim von Arnim, Clemens Brentano, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and the brothers Grimm, we will explore the central areas and practices of their romantic discourse of radical aesthetic, philosophical, political, and sociocultural modernity. We will critically examine how the romantics manifested and confronted the defining conflicts of their political and cultural present as these crystallized in Berlin, the capital of Prussia, 19th century Germany's emerging hegemonic power. We will also survey influential contemporary critiques of the romantic movement (Goethe, Hegel, Heine) and follow its legacies in the 20th century.

COURSE OBJECTIVES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

Knowledge:

- understand key 'romantic' concepts and practices across literature, aesthetic theory, philosophy, and other discourses in themselves, in their interrelation, and in their evolution
- critically reflect on the ways in which the emergence and presence of romantic modernity in Berlin was conditioned by the political and sociocultural realities of Prussia's capital and of Germany during the first half of the 19th century
- critically explore the cultural trajectories of the discourse of romanticism for the 20th century and the present
- confidently engage with a paradigmatic range of 'romantic' modes of writing and thinking across the discourses of literature, philosophy, and history

Academic/Transferable Skills:

- critically assess 'romantic' modes of thinking and writing in relation to their historical contexts and conceptual afterlives
- assess the significance of the discourse of 'romanticism' for the sociopolitical and cultural present
- communicate 'romantic' concepts effectively and characterize 'romantic' modes of writing and artistic creation in detail
- develop theses and arguments based on the study of literary and theoretical texts and their contexts in other discourses

Competencies:

- contextualize literary and theoretical texts with each other and with other discourses
- establish connections between modes of thinking/writing/artistic creation, and their sociocultural and political contexts

ASSIGNMENT INFO

Workload and assignments

In order to be granted 5 ECTS, participants will be asked to

- actively attend all sessions (a minimum of 75% attendance is required for classroom and online sessions)
- prepare and revise the classroom/online sessions
- hand in the following **assignments**:
 - Commentary on, or close reading of, a text included in the syllabus (approximately 9000 characters including spaces)
 - Critical essay (approximately 16.000 characters including spaces)

Failure to fulfil one of the mentioned components results in failure of the class.

Assessment Components

The final grade will be composed of the above-mentioned assignments.

YOUR INSTRUCTOR

Dr. Christian A. Wollin

is an independent lecturer, writer, and presenter. He received his doctorate in modern German literature from Freie Universität Berlin. From October 2019 to January 2024, he researched and taught at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, as a fellow of the Martin Buber Society of Fellows in the Humanities and Social Sciences. His research focuses on the German early romantics and Hölderlin, modernism, German literature after 1945, the genre of poetry, literary theory, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault. He has written critical pieces, essays, and essayistic fiction about Milo de Angelis, Arendt, Benjamin, Carl Einstein, Rahel Levin Varnhagen, Valzyhna Mort, and Catherine Pozzi.

COURSE SCHEDULE

2 hours à 45 min per week (summer semester: 14 weeks)

Week 1: Introduction: Romanticism in the European Age of Revolution – German Romanticism in Berlin, Capital of the Kingdom of Prussia

Week 2: What is 'Romantic'? The Definitory Drift of Romanticism

Is 'romantic' an inherent quality of things or a state of mind? A mode of thinking or a way of doing? The core of individual artistic practice or a communal way of living? Something transhistorical or something possible only in the contemporary?

- Friedrich Schlegel, excerpt from letter to A. W. Schlegel, ca. December 1st, 1797, and fragment no. 116 from *Athenäum* (1798)
- Novalis, fragments from *Prolegomena* (1798)
- Ludwig Tieck, excerpt from *Introduction to Phantasmus* (1812)

Week 3: Temporal Horizons of Romanticism

Which experiences and emerging philosophical concepts of historical time shaped the ways in which the romantics responded to an epoch defined by the event of the 1789 French Revolution and its long aftermath?

- Immanuel Kant, excerpt from *Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* (1784)
- Friedrich Schlegel, fragments from *Athenäum* (1798) and *Philosophical Apprenticeship* (1799)
- Achim von Arnim, *What Should Happen in this Happiness* (1807)

Week 4: Politics of Romanticism

What political positions did the romantics articulate in an age in which Prussia and the other German states were the sites of enduring conflict between monarchic and aristocratic restoration, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and the birth of the proletariat?

- Novalis, fragments from *Faith and Love or The King and the Queen* (1798)
- Bettina von Arnim, excerpt from *This Book Belongs to the King* (1843)
- Jacob Grimm, motions for the Frankfurt National Assembly deliberations on the German People's Basic Rights (1848)

Week 5: Intersectional Spaces and Social Media of Berlin Romanticism

Which precarious spaces of intersectional sociability/discourse were decisive for making romanticism happen in Berlin, and which other social media supplemented them?

- Friedrich Schleiermacher, excerpt from letter to Charlotte Schleiermacher, July 25-August 4, 1798
- Rahel Levin Varnhagen, excerpt from *Rahel. A Book of Remembrance for her Friends* (1834/March 1799)
- Henriette Herz, excerpt from *Memoirs* (1818-1829)

Week 6: Gendering Romanticism

What concepts of gender did the romantics develop, and how did these concepts inform their social practices and their understanding of authorship and intellectual production?

- Friedrich Schleiermacher, fragment no. 364 from *Athenäum* (1798) and excerpt from letter to Charlotte Schleiermacher, February 12, 1801
- Rahel Levin Varnhagen, letter to Karl Gustav Brinckmann, November 2nd, 1799
- Dorothea Schlegel (Brendel Mendelssohn Veit), excerpt from *Diary* (1800s)
- Jacob Grimm, excerpt from *Review of German 19th Century Female Writers by Carl von Schindel* (1822)

Week 7: Against Philistine Finitude, I:

The Twin Discovery of the Romantic Infinite and Romantic Irony

What happens to the social practices of art and living and to their relationship once they are restructured around the twin binaries of 'infinite/finite' and 'romantic/philistine'? How do the notions of the romantic infinite and romantic irony relate to hard sociocultural facts?

- Novalis, fragments from *Pollen* (1798)
- Friedrich Schlegel, fragments from *Lyceum* (1797) and *Athenäum* (1798)
- Achim von Arnim, Clemens Brentano, and Heinrich von Kleist, *Different Sensations before a Seascape by Friedrich, on which a Capucine Monk [is depicted]* (1810)

Week 8: Excursion: Berlin's Romantic Past in the Present

We will explore present sites of Berlin's romantic past. Possible destinations include the Alte Nationalgalerie with its signature collections of romantic artists, the Staatsbibliothek with its prominent holdings of romantic authors' manuscripts, and cemeteries with the resting places of Henriette Herz, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Friedrich Schlegel, and others.

Week 9: Against Philistine Finitude, II: The Discourse(s) of Romantic Universal Poetry

How did the romantic discovery of the infinite impact the established divisions of the arts, of literary genres, and between discourses? What kind of discourse/medium did the romantics deem most suited for the task of infinitizing the finite (and vice versa)?

- Friedrich Schlegel, fragment no. 116 from *Athenäum* (1798)
- Novalis, fragments from *Pollen* (1798) and *Fragments and Studies* (1799/1800)
- E. T. A. Hoffmann, excerpt from *Kreiskleriana* (1814/15)
- Bettina von Arnim, excerpt from *Goethe's Correspondence with a Child* (1835)

Week 10: Against Philistine Finitude, III: Art as Religion or Religion instead of Art (and Philosophy)?

Did the romantic discourse of the infinite seek to supplant the societal function of religion? Or did romanticism not rather understand itself as a project meant to create religion anew?

- Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder/Ludwig Tieck, excerpt from *Innermost Outpourings of an Art-Loving Monk* (1797)
- Novalis, fragments from *Pollen* (1798)
- Friedrich Schlegel, excerpt from *On Religion. Speeches to the Educated among its Despisers* (1799)

Week 11: Altered States of Mind and Meaning: The Marvellous and the Uncanny

What comes to the fore when romantic authors probe human interiority and the faculty of the imagination beyond the limits of social and religious control?

- E. T. A. Hoffmann, *The Sandman* (1816)

Week 12: The Poetry of Volk: Always-already artful or only natural?

What kind of beginning, origin, or essence did the romantics strive to access through the practice of collecting and editing folk tales and folk songs in the German language?

- Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano, excerpts from *The Boy's Magic Horn* (1805-1808)
- Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, first version of *Sleeping Beauty* (1810)
- Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Preface* from *Fairy Tales for Children and the Home* (1812)

Week 13: Contemporary Critiques of Romanticism: Goethe, Hegel, Heine

What did romanticism look like in the critical mirrors of Germany's preeminent literary instance of much of the 19th century, of the Prussian state philosopher of speculative idealism and the World Spirit, and of the day's foremost German Jewish literary champion of political emancipation?

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, excerpt from *Maxims and Reflections* (1833/1840)

- Johann Peter Eckermann, excerpt from *Conversations with Goethe in the Final Years of his Life, 1823-1832* (1836/1848)
- Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, excerpt from *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1835-1842)
- Heinrich Heine, excerpt from *The Romantic School* (1835)

Week 14: Romantic Legacies

How and why did the discourse of romanticism re-enter the fields of music, literature, and aesthetic theory long after the end of its movement?

- Guillaume Apollinaire, excerpt from *Alcohols* (1913)
- Viktor Shklovsky, excerpt from *Art as Device/Technique* (1917/1925)
- Christa Wolf, excerpt from *No Place. Nowhere* (1979)

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

- Registration on Moodle (HU's e-learning platform)

in case of online sessions

- Fully functional device (laptop, tablet, PC)
- Stable internet connection
- Software: Zoom (video/audio)
- *Recommended* hardware: external headset for better sound quality

EXPECTATIONS & POLICIES

Preparation for lively discussions: be on time, have at least the required readings completed, and points in mind for discussion or clarification.

Assignments: complete all assignments according to the specified requirements on the schedule including handing them over to the lecturer.

Commitment: pay particular attention to the lecturer and respect differences of opinions in this international classroom.

Academic guidelines: Comply with academic integrity policies. Plagiarism in even a small assignment will result in failing the entire course.

Attendance policy: Students must contact their class teachers to catch up on missed work – to excuse absence please contact the lecturer.

The course and its syllabus are subject to change. Last update: 02/02/2026