

URSULA HEISE

TEKST STEF CRAPS

The Faculty of Arts and Philosophy is honoured to host Ursula Heise (UCLA) as an International Francqui Professor in the autumn of 2024. Heise is one of the foremost scholars in the environmental humanities, a field of inquiry that seeks to highlight how the various ecological crises we face – such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and widespread pollution – are not merely scientific or technological challenges but also deeply intertwined with culture, history, and politics. Her work has been highly influential in shaping the direction of ecocriticism or environmental literary and cultural studies in particular.



Could you please introduce yourself a little more fully? What else do people need to know about you?

“I’m particularly interested in narratives about biodiversity in all its dimensions: my last monograph, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*, focused on extinction and conservation, and I’ve also researched narratives about plants and about urban wildlife. ‘Multispecies justice’ has been an especially productive concept for me in thinking about these issues. My research is always comparative – it aims to show how narratives about the same environmental crisis converge or conflict across languages, cultures, and regions.”

What are you working on at the moment?

“I’ve recently co-edited a collection of essays called *Environment and Narrative in Vietnam* with Chi P. Pham, a colleague at the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences in Hanoi, which came out in February 2024. In collaboration with a UCLA colleague, Danny Snelson, I just completed the first episode of *Grand Theft Eco*, a series of animated ‘machinima’ videos about the environmental futures of Los Angeles in 2040, which is based on ‘modding’ the storyworld of the videogame *Grand Theft Auto V*. We’re working on the second episode now. And I’m writing a monograph about speculative fiction and the imagination of environmental futures, with the aim of showing how we might move away from dystopian visions and reclaim the political power of utopian thinking.”

What do you see as the hottest topics in the environmental humanities today?

“The environmental humanities today – like environmentalism as a social movement – are dominated by

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climate change. Climate change is quite literally the 'hottest' topic! There's also great interest in environmental justice across various areas of concern from extraction to pollution and crisis resilience. The 'blue' or 'oceanic humanities', energy humanities, and human-animal and human-plant studies have been extremely vibrant areas for a number of years. Indigenous cultures and their knowledge about the natural world have been another huge topic of interest. And a great deal of EH work seeks to envision alternatives to capitalism – often in connection with environmental justice."

What motivated you to accept this visiting professorship? What are you looking forward to the most about your time here?

"In general, I love opportunities to interact with faculty, students, and activists who work in different cultural and political contexts than the ones I'm used to, and to learn from their approaches, insights, and experiences. Environmental humanities research is stellar at several Belgian universities. So I can't believe my luck that I'll be able to collaborate with faculty whose work I've read, cited, and admired for many years in person. UGent's Department of Literary Studies, for example, includes several faculty who work on the interface of narrative and environment, which is also the one that I'm most interested in. There are several colleagues working on narratives of climate change, and the NARMESH project has been of great interest to me in its exploration of narrative beyond the human. The research that UGent faculty do on narrative in media such as the graphic novel and videogames also resonates with my work on videogames and graphic narrative. So there'll be lots to talk about!"

Can you tell us a little about your plans for the next four months?

"I look forward to the four seminars I'll be teaching at UGent, KU Leuven, UCLouvain, and ULB. They'll

engage with the topics I'm researching – multispecies and environmental justice, urban biodiversity, the imagination of environmental futures, the role of different media in shaping narratives about the environment – and they'll be exciting moments to exchange ideas and approaches to these issues with an internationally renowned group of colleagues and their students. It'll be a time to develop plans for future research and teaching collaborations in the environmental humanities."

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2 OKTOBER 2024

Inaugurele lezing 'Environmental Futures and the Challenges of Realist Storytelling' – Belvédère Boekentoren, gevolgd door een receptie in de Faculteitsbibliotheek.

13 NOVEMBER 2024

Class of Excellence seminar 'Urban Biodiversity and Narrative' – Blandijnberg 2, Gent.

9 DECEMBER 2024

Slotsymposium 'Imagining Environmental Futures' – zaal Nick Ervinck, Zebrastraat 32, Gent.

Meer info over de aanstelling van Ursula Heise en de activiteiten via [ugent.be/lw/francqui](https://www.ugent.be/lw/francqui).