

Forest as *Volk*: *Ewiger Wald* and the Religion of Nature in the Third Reich

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Robert A. Pois has argued that a prominent feature of Nazi ideology was a religion of nature.¹ In fact, Adolf Hitler, Martin Bormann, Paul Goebbels, Hermann Göring, Heinrich Himmler, R. Walther Darré, and other Nazi leaders all wrote and spoke about the need for seeing humankind as part of nature, subject to the rigors of natural law. They shared a vision of timeless reality, immune from the traumas of history, i.e., a non-transcendent Providence acting through nature. By conforming to the laws of nature, so the premise went, the German people would attain a strength and greatness enabling them to rise above their troubled history and dreary existence. This act of “collective regeneration,” to use Mircea Eliade’s term, would recover the *Volksgemeinschaft* that was felt to be the true spiritual home of the German people.² While some have interpreted Nazi millenarianism as a heretical offshoot of Christianity,³ Pois demonstrates how the National Socialist leaders explicitly sought to supplant the Judeo-Christian tradition with a religion of nature—a religion rooted in the indigenous spirit of Germanic “blood and soil.”⁴

The natural religion of National Socialism achieved practical expression in the sanctification of the nation. With the turning of the German nation into a sanctified *Volksgemeinschaft*, knowledge that did not serve the interests of this community was not merely extraneous, it was heretical.⁵

A variety of media were used to advance this new ideology by capturing the hearts and minds of the German people. Film was one of the most effective means of communication, and German filmmak-

ers were technically advanced in their art. One film, *Ewiger Wald* (Eternal Forest), released in 1936, stands out both for its artistic merit and appeal to the Germanic “forest feeling” in focusing directly on a *Volksgemeinschaft* rooted in German tribal traditions of living in the forest, while attributing Germany’s troubled history to foreign influences, especially the Christianity brought by the Roman invaders.⁶ In other words, Nature, with all its violence and beauty, was the primary model for conceiving German history and identity in the Third Reich.

The choice of the forest to represent life forces found in nature was especially effective because of the German people’s strong and well-articulated “forest feeling.” A German professor of forestry, Franz Heske, articulated this forest feeling in his book on German forestry written at about the same time that *Ewiger Wald* was being produced. Assuming a Romantic posture, Heske states:

German culture sprang from the forest. It is a forest culture. In holy groves the ancient Germans worshiped their gods. Christian missionaries had to fell the mighty ancient oaks that were dedicated to the Thunder-God, before the new religion could take root. In the old forests, the present generation seeks to recapture that reverential awe which is the foundation of morality. The culture of the city, with its unceasing human turmoil and daily elbow-to-elbow struggle for bread and for preferment, moves the little Ego into the center and finally causes the whole world to be viewed from this minute observation post. The civilized countryside, with its flat fields, its innumerable boundaries, fences, hedges, and boundary stones, is everywhere a reminder of exclusiveness and segregation, of the ego and of the microcosm subservient thereto.

Not so in the woods. Primordial depths, mysterious murmuring, and whispering surround the wanderer. Loneliness in the face of a gigantic Nature [sic] in which everything is large, everything is complex and yet unified, soon makes the little ego dissolve organically into the new totality. The egoistic soul expands and becomes like a transparent ball in which the organic streams of the universe flood back and forth. The armor falls, and man is free!⁷

Elias Canetti, a mid-twentieth-century social psychologist talked about the importance of the forest in German society. He stated:

In no other modern country has the forest-feeling remained as alive as it has in Germany. The parallel rigidity of the upright trees and their density and number fill the heart of the German with a deep and mysterious delight. To this day he loves to go deep into the forest where his forefathers lived; he feels at one with the trees.⁸

Nazis clearly understood the German cultural code, including the power of the forest as a crowd symbol when they produced *Ewiger Wald*. Robert Pogue Harrison has recently pointed to the cultural significance of the forest as place of lawlessness and enchantment. He claims that “forests mark the provincial edge of Western civilization, in the literal as well as imaginative domains.”⁹ Forests, according to Harrison, have retained to this day their associations in the cultural imagination of the West. Our cultural memory of forests still remains the correlate of human transcendence. The German tradition in particular, we argue, seems to be intertwined with mythical conceptions of the forest which, in fairy tales, for example, is constructed as the supreme authority on earth, as the great provider, and as the place where society’s conventions no longer hold true.¹⁰ German forests are, at the same time, a source of natural right as well as free, alluring, and dangerous, i.e., a very contradictory and contested space.

Our analysis will examine the proposition that *Ewiger Wald* called upon “forest feelings” with the purpose of transferring these attachments to the Nation, with the Nation representing a *Volksgemeinschaft*. We argue that the film intends to present the forest as a symbol for the German people who, like the forest, would enter a transcendent, eternal realm, realized in Nazi strength and pride. This portrayal of the forest as the German people is rooted in a Romantic vision. In the context of the anti-rationalist sentiment in German culture upon which the Nazis capitalized one might even claim, as David Welch has done, that “[t]he German penchant for trees was not dissimilar to the mountain genre that emerged during the Weimar Republic. An anti-rational and anti-critical element was present in both tendencies.”¹¹ These tendencies also embrace the

idea of an organic rural idyll and a strong anti-urban and anti-intellectual bias that is characteristic of *völkisch* thought. Peter Viereck, among others, has argued that Romanticism gradually evolved into Nazism and represented a radicalized version of a cultural and political reaction against rationalism, form, and universal standards (all associated with Mediterranean culture).¹²

Other interpreters of the film have pointed out an important internal contradiction between the narrative and visual clues of the film. While, on the one hand, the German people are visually portrayed as a peaceful nation which is frequently attacked by aggressive neighbors (i.e., Romans and French) and has to defend itself, the narrative is, on the other hand, “continually interjected with contemporary Nazi rhetoric which, in turn, imposes its own contradictory interpretation of past events by urging cinema audiences: ‘People, be not afraid of war! People, aspire to victory!’ and ‘we will not surrender. Let the flags lead us into battle!’”¹³ Others still have noted the lyricism in the scenes that seek to foreground the peacefulness of the German nation: “Mais le film retrouve aussi la douceur et la fluidité du lyrisme d’Eichendorff, ce poète romantique dont les strophes peuplent toujours anthologies et manuels et qui fut sans doute le plus grand amoureux des arbres de toute l’histoire allemande.”¹⁴ Cadar’s and Courtade’s references to Romantic poetry are important for our context since they show the extent to which the Nazis capitalized on a specific cultural tradition to capture public sentiment. We argue that these internal contradictions between narrative and visual clues, that are undoubtedly important for a detailed interpretation of the aesthetic merits of the film, are contained (*aufgehoben*) in a reading of the film that seeks to situate the argument presented in the context of the role of religion in environmental history.

Constructing a Religion of Nature

Ewiger Wald was produced under the auspices of the “N.S. Kulturgemeinde” (“National Socialist Cultural Organization”). The film’s architect Walter Reimann tried to capture monumental images by focusing on tall and strong heads that fill the entire screen. In fact, many scenes have the effect of stylized and choreographed

tableaus. These techniques expressed *völkisch* ideals, conveying the pathetic sentiments of National Socialist longing. The film seeks to cover the changing relationship between the German people and its forest over the course of German history from pre-historic times to the Nazi era. It relies on the concept of “blood and soil” which is built on the notion of an organic and mystical relationship between man and nature, and involves the idea of an organically grown community/nation (*Volksgemeinschaft*). On the level of intentionality, *Ewiger Wald* indeed accomplishes what it set out to do: the forest becomes a metaphor for the German people, and, at the end of the film, the German *Volk* is symbolically identified with the nation—a nation centered around a Maypole capped with a mantle of swastika-bearing flags. This symbolic transformation is accomplished by repeated use of religious symbolism, archaic German poetic narration, and skilled cinematography. Sacred space was symbolized by trees, Maypoles, farmers working the soil and caring for the forest, artisans building and sculpting from wood, and, ultimately, a Nazi rally. Sacred time is emphasized through a recurrence of seven events depicting death and rebirth. Taken together, this complex succession of symbols tells a story of a *Volksgemeinschaft* rooted in Germanic soil, identified with the forest (singular), threatened by those who are foreign, alienated from Christianity, destined to expand the soil and the forest, and triumphant over death and time by facing danger and refusing to concede. An anti-church campaign is evident in six scenes in which traditional faith or the clergy is challenged by a faith in nature and in the life of the forest.

Although presented as an historical narrative of the German people, the persuasive power of *Ewiger Wald* comes from its mythical character. The timelessness of history is reflected in the structure of the narrative itself. Present and future tenses are intermingled with past tense descriptions of historical events. Nazi beliefs and aspirations were infused through use of present tense imperatives to describe forests during historical eras. Carl Maria Holzapfel, who wrote the script, sought to represent the forest as a metaphor for the German people, “maybe because everything that lives in the forest has to try to adapt first before it reaches for weapons.”¹⁵ Holzapfel saw the film as an attempt to turn history into nature. The forest is ‘eternal’ (beyond history) for Holzapfel because it is seen as having a constant balance governed by an endless (eternal) organic princi-

ple.

The structure of the film itself reflects the mythical and ahistorical sense of time it seeks to portray. *Ewiger Wald* is a semi-documentary in the tradition of the *Kulturfilm* developed by Ufa in the mid-1920s. The *Kulturfilm* sought to combine the constructive approach of the feature film with the urgency of the documentaries and newsreels.¹⁶ *Ewiger Wald* fills this purpose by seeking to awaken German Nationalism and the need for expanding living space (*Lebensraum*). It also reflects the Nazi belief in a pure German race as a master race whose roots lie in the fertile soil and the richness of their blood. Life rooted in both nature and the *Volk* was thought of as an organic unit that translates into a demand for more living space and for the purity of the race. The film represents this sentiment, for example, by showing the juxtaposition of German racial purity with the French corrupted race in a scene where the victorious French soldiers (played by North African colonial subjects) oversee the felling of (German) trees by WWI German war prisoners.

What appears as an engaging history of the *Volk* told through what happens to soil and forest is in fact a mystical appeal to a monistic belief in the eternal unity of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, attained when people live like the forest, or when they live by the inviolable laws of life.¹⁷ To believe that rebirth will follow violent death is to live by the laws of nature, thereby reassuring the German people that an eternal nation (*Volk*) will be attained by embracing violence and death as natural and rejuvenating. The topic of rebirth through violence is presented early in the film and then repeated six more times. Our own translation of the full text and a summary and analysis of some of the film's crucial scenes are presented below to fully illustrate how the film accomplished this purpose.

Rebirth through Violence in *Ewiger Wald*

The basic premise of the film rests on an analogy between the German people and the forest. The journey through German history becomes a journey through the German landscape.¹⁸ The final version of the film assembled these landscapes in an aestheticized version of mythic German history. A peaceful, often reverential, opening mood is set by seven minutes of musical accompaniment to

scenes of forests progressing from summer to fall and winter. Most of these are angle shots positioning the unseen viewer below the trees, as if walking through the forest. Foreboding music and an avalanche interrupt tranquility, and are accompanied by the commanding voice of trained theater actor Günther Hadank resembling the timbre and cadence of Adolf Hitler's oratory: "Those who do not fear winter's blast can overcome death." A joyful song and scenes of streams fed by melting snow, wildflowers, and budding trees immediately announce the coming of spring. A text then appears to open the story:

To those of you who come to find metaphor in the image
Which nature tells you
In death and creation.
To the nation which is searching, fighting, and trying to
Build the eternal *Reich*
This song is dedicated.

Narration then accompanies a view of two, intertwined trees on the horizon of a distant hill, with cloud cover and, ultimately, lightening as background:

Eternal forest, eternal nation.
The tree lives like you and I.
It reaches for space like you and I.
Its death and creation are woven together in time.
The nation—like the forest—stands in eternity.

This is the film's only reference to individual trees, and signals a shift in identification from the individual to the collective—the *Volk*. Eternity is to be found in the weaving together of trees (individuals) in a cycle of death and re-creation. Such imagery is pregnant with religious symbolism.¹⁹ The interweaving of trees, and individuals with trees, implies what van der Leeuw refers to as "conjoint growth" in which the "power" (mana) of a tree planted at the birth of a child imparted greatness.²⁰ Only, in this case, individuals are symbolically "empowered" by identifying with the laws of life governing the forest, and ultimately with the nation. This symbolic transformation had deep roots in German mythology as Simon

Schama has argued.

Schama recounts the history of Germanic tribes who celebrated their collective tribal birth in sacred groves by offering human sacrifices on tree trunks:

It seems possible that the grisly rite was a re-enactment of the self-sacrifice of the Teutonic god Wotan who hanged himself on the boughs of the cosmic ash tree Yggdrasil (the Nordic symbol of the universe) for nine days and nights, in a ritual of death and resurrection. Waiting in vain for succor, Wotan saw beneath the great tree a vast pile of rune stones, which he succeeded in raising through the force of his supernatural will. Standing erect, the runes liberated Wotan from his arboreal ordeal and into a new, rejuvenated life of unprecedented power and strength.²¹

The “world tree” is a common religious symbol in tribal cultures around the world.²² Like the sacred groves of German tribes, it represents sacred space where people gather to re-enact their myths of origin. *Ewiger Wald* portrays the forest as such a sacred place of origin.

The next segment of the film presents a succession of scenes portraying the prehistoric settlement of the land by German people, including an agrarian village, communal living, burial of the dead in wooden caskets made of hollowed-out logs, dying and living forests, and people gathering to dance around a Maypole. All scenes were played by people with no formal training in acting. The sets were constructed by Walter Reimann, who sought to present an authentic, scenic reenactment of history. Special attention was given to portraying a close connection between the forest and the people, as in the scene where hollowed-out logs were used as caskets. The narrator uses the collective “we” to blend “blood and soil” ideology with an implicit imperative for the *Volk* to take the place of God in weaving new life following death.²³

We originated in the forest.
We live like the forest.
From the forest we built our living space.
Our souls grow like the forest,

Full of life, full of joy, full of calamity,
 Full of questions. God, tell us:
 What is the meaning of death?
 After every death there is new life.
 Yet God is silent.
 He leaves it to the ancestors to weave fate
 And come together under his sun.

God could not explain the meaning of death, so it was up to the ancestors to exercise their collective will to create new life by coming together in sacred space around the “world tree,” a Maypole. The rhetoric of this scene suggests a religion of nature in which people would turn to the forest, not the Church, to learn that “[. . .] death is not final [. . .] it is always followed by a new birth.”²⁴ According to the film, new birth was something the German people could accomplish by imitating life, in this case a vision of life informed by pre-Christian mythology.²⁵

The form of new life to follow death was presented following a highly symbolic death at the end of the next segment. The segment begins with a series of scenes which features a horse-borne invasion of Roman soldiers bearing SPQR standards with the Roman eagle, a fierce battle in the Teutoburg Forest (Varus/Arminius), soldiers wading through rivers, lightning strikes felling trees, and Romans in retreat. The narrator calls upon the “soil” and the “forest” with an implicit imperative to condition the German people for ethnic cleansing and war:

You signs of foreign people
 Standards of the Romans
 What are you looking for in our country, in our forests?
 Those who are foreign to this soil, to the forest of this kind,
 Will suffer unspeakable pain.
 Our nation is in danger! Hold nation
 Fight with the soil for your existence!
 Don't have fear of a war!

Death is featured in the final scene of the battle showing a Roman soldier bearing the SPQR standard being thrown into a river. The Roman standard sinks, momentarily rises to the surface, and then

disappears again into the depths. This violent death fades to a scene of a tranquil lily pond accompanied by soft music. These scenes are powerful religious imagery, since aquatic symbolism is nearly universal in religious rites. According to Eliade,

[. . .] waters precede every form and *support* every creation [. . .]. On the other hand, immersion in water signifies regression to the preformal, re-incorporation into the undifferentiated mode of pre-existence [. . .]. *immersion* is equivalent to a dissolution of forms. This is why the symbolism of waters implies both death and rebirth.²⁶

But rebirth was anything but a peaceful emergence from the lily pond anticipated in the previous scene. It was symbolized at the end of the next scene by a flaming SS-sign rising from a massive funeral pyre constructed from large logs. Foreign blood had died and been re-absorbed into undifferentiated nature, yielding peace. German blood had died, but, like the Phoenix, been re-born from the ashes of the forest as the SS, all as the imperative “Hitler-type” voice of the narrator proclaimed:

Deep in the forest
Will be born the nation’s knowledge
The nation’s victory.

Rebirth was to come from the forest, from life, not from outside influences, as depicted in the next three scenes.²⁷

A brief scene shows Viking ships to which the narrator comments:

Out of the dark of the night,
The power of the Vikings rose.
They owe their power and glory
To mighty ships from the sacred forest.

By implication, the Germans’ power and glory will come from turning to nature, to life, to the “sacred forest.” Then, accompanying somewhat foreboding music and images of crosses imposed on the sky, crosses in churches and monasteries, somber praying monks,

nuns, and candles, the narrator intones:

When the south was cleared of forests
Christianity followed the forest to the north.
When the cross was raised in the South,
Fate took a new turn in the North.

The next scene is accompanied by a plaintive, heart-stirring song of life and features the nuns reaching upward toward soft leaves on backlit branches and then nuns combing their long hair while sitting in windows and looking longingly at the forest. The message is clear: life is in nature, the forest, not in the church. A male voice sings a song about the forest:

Who is courting you,
Who is overpowering you,
You ever powerful force?

You are more powerful than
Young and old.
There is no cure against you.

I pray to God
That the forest is making me a better person
Ever since I recognized the truth
And wish to serve you at all times.

I will remain steadfast
And loyal, o queen,
Have mercy
And let me dedicate my life to you.

Collective rebirth becomes more programmatic in the next several segments of the film. To a scene of Medieval life featuring columns of battle-ready “*Deutschritter*,” the “Hitler-type” voice of Günther Hadank commands, in a veiled reference preparing Germany for the invasion of Poland:

To the east you can hear the words,
“German knights take up your swords!
Expand the soil, expand the forest!
Create room for the nation and its inheritors!”

A succession of scenes accompanied by songs features milling, blacksmithing, felling trees, floating logs, and sawing timbers to construct a Medieval town (later burned to show a peasant revolt).

Building of the Medieval town continues in scenes of craftsmen, artisans, and gothic wood sculptures that, according to the narrator, gave voice to the forest:

The blossoming of the nation, the power of the forests
Builds German cities with glory and power.
From the masterpiece, the forest greets and speaks
As a German portrait.

We should keep in mind that *Ewiger Wald* was conceived and produced by people who were either sympathetic with or enthusiastic about the National Socialist movement. Foremost among the enthusiasts was the film’s architect, Walter Reimann—who is best known for constructing the set for the expressionist classic *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Reimann left his artistic credo in a series of short articles that appeared in the Nazi journal *Kultur-Wacht* in 1933. His primary interest was in contributing to the revival of German film through a link to the tradition of German painting (as opposed to Hollywood films that embraced more stylized and constructed aspects of filmmaking) and was committed to making a truly German film with genuinely German topics. Reimann spent time in Hollywood working on one of Ernst Lubitsch’s films in 1928 and 1929, and returned to Germany with a decidedly anti-American attitude, including a dislike for mixed races. In his articles, Reimann emerges as a reformer who criticizes bad filmmaking and instead wants to conceive of filmmaking as an art. The sets in the *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, he believed, contributed to the effect of the film as *Gesamtkunstwerk*.²⁸ In 1926 he designed the cover for Thea von Harbou’s novel *Metropolis* where he highlighted the fascinating horror image of a futuristic city. He then collaborated with Thea von Harbou on her first feature films, *Elisabeth und der Narr* (1933) and

Hannelies Himmelfahrt (1933/34). When von Harbou and Fritz Lang separated, Lang went to Hollywood and von Harbou became a faithful member of the Nazi Party. While on the set for *Elisabeth und der Narr*, Reimann got to know Meersburg near Lake Konstanz and its genuine Romantic character, a place to which he would return in 1935 with the crew filming *Ewiger Wald*. The idea for a film about the forest was probably born in 1934 when Carl Maria Holzapfel, writer and director of the “Reichsamt Feierabend” in the organization “Kraft durch Freude,” joined with Lex-Film producer Albert Graf von Pestalozza to propose a film about a forest to the N.S. Kulturgemeinde.²⁹ Reimann also had personal contacts with the bureaucrats in the fascist “Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur” which emerged as N.S. Kulturgemeinde in 1934 after a fusion with the fascist organization of theatergoers, “Deutsche Bühne.” The N.S. Kulturgemeinde was the organization that was charged with reorganizing the entire art and culture scene of the Third Reich, and infusing it with *völkisch* ideology and National Socialist ideas, with the help of symposia, theatrical productions, concerts, readings, exhibits, and other artistic forms. For the film industry, this meant that the N.S. Kulturgemeinde primarily sponsored “artistically worthwhile art films.”

After the sequence featuring Medieval towns follows a scene of a gothic cathedral that dissolves back and forth into a forest with large trunks (pillars) and high canopy (dome), as the narrator comments:

You were the forest in the days of our ancestors,
 Model of high craftsmanship
 For the cathedrals that rise
 High, like the power of your trunks.

The camera then focuses on a rosette window high in the cathedral before shifting to the exterior of the window. As the camera pans slowly upward to a spire that dissolves into an alpine tree and then pans to alpine forest, the narrator says:

When we lost the faith
 Which was holy to the Fathers,
 German faith was reborn
 In the almighty power of the canopies/cathedrals.

The narrator uses the German word *Dome* to refer to Cathedrals in the preceding passage, and uses it again at the end of the passage. However, *Dome* can refer to either “canopies” or “cathedrals,” depending on the context. The shift in imagery at the end of the scene yields an ambiguous translation of “canopies” or “cathedrals,” since the words preceded a cathedral spire dissolving into a tree.³⁰ An interpretation suggesting that faith in the church was lost and “reborn in the almighty power of the canopies” is consistent with the programmatic message following in the next segment.

The photographers and the composer for *Ewiger Wald* employed a variety of techniques to turn history into nature: associative montages, scene dissolves, match cuts, and suggestive film music are among the most common. Metonymic sequencing is used to visually identify the German people with the forest. Wood is featured as border crossing, maypoles, rafts, buildings, and art objects. Dissolves equate forest canopies and cathedrals and rows of planted trees with rows of soldiers. In fact, German film scholar Karsten Witte has argued that the use of such dissolves in Nazi cinema served as a formal device for essentializing a distinct way of processing and reshaping the world: the dissolve, namely, replaces experience and thus transforms history into nature.³¹ One of the scenes he notes is the scene in which a line of Prussian soldiers find reconfiguration as a row of trees. Sepp Allgeier, a leading cameraman from Leni Riefenstahl’s crew that produced *Triumph of the Will*, was also responsible for the camera work in *Ewiger Wald*. This may account for some of the striking similarities in camera technique between the two films (moving camera, scene dissolves, and angle shots). Guido Seeber, the other leading cameraman, previously shot Paul Wegener’s *The Golem* (1914) and *Dirnentragodie* (1927), thereby accounting for similarities in photographic style. Also evident is a close cinematographic relationship between *Ewiger Wald* and the genre of the mountain film, especially the films by Arnold Fanck and *Blue Light* (1932) by Leni Riefenstahl. *Ewiger Wald*, in other words, utilizes contemporary cinematographic conventions that were explored in these other genres to provide a formal equivalent to its main argument about the forest as a model for the newly reborn German nation.

In the next scene a massive felling of trees is shown to be governed by the clergy and the Medieval knights, with the knights

intimidating the farmers and cutting the forests for their own profits. The farmers mobilize and petition the clergy for relief. An internal narrative by a farmer explains their petition:

The common law is burning in my blood.
Does the church make the injustice just?
The forest gives wood, the wood gives money,
And money and power rules the world.
The ownership of the German forest
Remained with the farmers.
We only took the right to use
And thus protected the land.

The response came from the internal dialogue of a monk, ending with a scene of a monk holding a crucifix to the petitioner:

What the church takes belongs to the church.
Whoever disturbs peace will be cast out
According to the law of the church and the Pope.
Peasants' demands are not becoming.
The wood in the forest brings cathedral after cathedral.
That's the law, as old as Rome.

The farmers respond by revolting, with their instructions written as graffiti: "Farmers take weapons, organize and burn down castles and monasteries." The Medieval town (built by Reimann) is burned by the farmers in the attack, and the knights triumph with cannon fire (with one scene featuring a double-image with a cross superimposed over their hostile actions) and fierce hand-to-hand combat.

Rebirth comes again from destitute farmers who arrive with wagons full of cones to re-seed the devastated forest:

The farmer is dead!
The nation in calamity.
The destroyed fields and forests are
Complaints from the homeland in the wind.
The seed is looking forward to the new deed
So that new forest will rise from spring soil.

But the next scene shows that the re-born forest is a regimented program planted in straight rows that dissolve into rows of eighteenth century Prussian soldiers. This transfusion of army and forest is accompanied by spirited marshal music and the “Hitler-type” voice of Hadank commanding:

Listen to me people!
The king demands
That the new forest stand here,
Precisely like soldier to soldier.

The rebirth of the forest is the sort of “conjoined-growth” identified by van der Leeuw when he discussed how trees are planted to give people strength—in this case disciplined military order.³² Canetti noted a similar identity when talking generically about crowd symbols in twentieth-century European societies:

The crowd symbol of the Germans was the *army*. But the army was more than just the army; it was the *marching forest* [. . .]. For the German, without his being clearly aware of it, army and forest transfused each other in every possible way. What to others might seem the army’s dreariness and barrenness kept for the German the life and glow of the forest [. . .]. He took the rigidity and straightness of the trees for his own law.³³

The film’s culminating death and rebirth scenes featuring the humiliating defeat of WWI and the triumphant rise of the Third Reich are preceded by interludes celebrating the forest as a setting for Romanticism and scenes complaining about a short-run, profit-seeking forest industry.³⁴ Romantic pastoral landscapes, a border crossing (*Schlagbaum*), a postal coach riding through Romantic scenery, and a bourgeois couple all enjoy nineteenth-century leisure and prosperity. A close-up shot of a white flower fades into an image of an idyllic hunting scene painted in the classical tradition where two women wear flowers in their hair and offer water to a tame buck. The viewer’s gaze is directed to the peaceful forest, however, that surrounds this tableau. The close-up shot of the idyllic scene in this painting gives way to another painting rendered in a more mod-

ern style which shows a young man reading from a scroll and relaxing peacefully in nature. A third painting is shown where a group of people including a group of children takes a stroll through the woods and is about to cross over a creek. These paintings are paired with narrative stating:

You blossom, flower of romanticism,
In paintings of German masters,
Eternal and unique.

Scenes showing felling, transport, and auctioning of wood are accompanied by narrative complaining:

Going, going, gone.
Industry doesn't care what follows.
Listen to her voice!
Industry needs the forest.

Dance music then accompanies a Wilhelminian Society party picturing the forest as a place for bourgeois leisure and entertainment. People are collected together by the forest and centered on a merry-go-round, much as they were earlier shown celebrating around a Maypole.

The final scenes of death are preceded by a return to images of “blood and soil” as a farmer in a grain field watches an ominous black cloud approaching. The horrible violence of WWI then explodes on the screen. Intense shelling severs trees that fall on running soldiers. Defeated German soldiers gather around a small Christmas tree and light a candle as “Silent Night, Holy Night” transitions to the German National Anthem. The camera turns to graves of German soldiers marked by crosses, which soon become a forest of crosses covering the hills—a dead forest.

The next scene shows French African soldiers supervising the felling of trees (occupation and exploitation of the Ruhr region as reparation payment to the French), while the narrator laments:

The nation is scattered and liberty lost.
German land is occupied by the enemy.
Charcoal and wood in the West are paid as tribute.

Rotten decay,
Infiltrated by a people of a foreign race.
How do you, Nation, carry the forest,
The unthinkable burden.

But the mood shifts with close-ups of swastika flags and the German eagle and triumphal music and pageantry of a Nazi gathering. The “Hitler-like” voice of the narrator commands:

We will not concede.
We, who overcame death,
Will announce rebirth and carry the banner toward the light!

Images of woodsmen chopping out inferior trees follow with commanding words implying the need for ethnic cleansing:

We cultivate the waiting soil.
Cut out what is sick and of foreign race.
The diversity of the species creates
The eternal forest which will build the new society
And a new society based on the eternal forest.

The forest (German blood) is to be cleansed by eliminating the unfit and non-Aryans.³⁵ Protecting the purity and diversity of plant species (and the variety of Aryan people) in the native German forest will make the forest eternal. It will live forever in a timeless state of stability.

The ultimate rebirth is symbolized by a Nazi rally with columns of banners and a huge Maypole. Masses of uniformed people are gathered around the Maypole as the narrator proclaims:

The Maypole blossoms like you and I.
Under the Maypole the Nation calls for you and me.
Sing the new song of the time!
Like the forest, the nation stands for eternity.

Triumphal marshal music builds as the camera pans up the Maypole, with its swastika flags and horizontal wreath until it fixes on the top where the pole is circled by swastika flags reaching up

into the heavens. All the symbols of the “world tree” are present, connecting the solid earth with the heavens. Elaborate pageantry lends the scene a religious aura of strength, hope, regeneration, and immortality.³⁶

Discussion and Conclusions

The words of Simon Schama help illuminate the implications of the forest as metaphor for the nation:

Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock [. . .]. But it should also be acknowledged that once a certain idea of landscape, a myth, a vision, establishes itself in an actual place, it has a peculiar way of muddling categories, of making metaphors more real than their referents; of becoming, in fact, part of the scenery.³⁷

Such blurring of categories was the genius of Nazi “revolutionaries.” In fact, as Robert Pois states so clearly, it may be misleading to refer to their communications as “propaganda,” since they came to believe most of what they were telling the German people. They too came to inhabit the mythical world they created. To take metaphors as reality was fundamental to the success of their revolution. Pois states it clearly:

The National Socialist religion of nature, in its positing of an absolute identification of nature and spirit, had allowed for a radical subordination of all state institutions, knowledge, and high culture to it while, at the same time demanding that a petty-bourgeois social stasis, presumably commensurate with the ‘state of nature’ itself, be maintained.³⁸

Nazi leaders understood, at least intuitively, that a revolution in religion would enable them to re-structure the ideological foundations of all institutions of the state—thereby enabling them to exercise power without disturbing the status or continuity of existing institutions and social classes consisting of Aryan people. A revolution in

belief and ritual would be a “bloodless revolution” for all who came to identify with the ideology of “blood and soil.” All major cultural institutions, including science, art, and even the church, would continue to exist so long as they came to identify with a religion of nature and did not undermine the conduct of war and racial cleansing. German society would continue, no, would become eternal, by embracing the “laws of life” symbolized by the forest.

Ewiger Wald, as a particular manifestation of the National Socialist religion of nature, lends insight into the role of religion in environmental history. As illustrated by Franz Heske’s writings during the 1930’s, practices as mundane as forest management can reflect, if not embody, prevailing religious beliefs and practices. We will therefore conclude with several observations about what can be learned from a critical analysis of *Ewiger Wald*.

First, an understanding of the nature of religion is essential for comprehending any historical religion of nature. After reviewing several definitions of religion, Robert Pois settles on Mary Douglas’s definition of religion as a “technology for overcoming risk” as well as a “well developed *Weltanschauung* or ideology.”³⁹ Later in his manuscript, Pois talks about the “pragmatism” of the Nazis to discuss how ideology and action come together in practice. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim rejected attempts to explain religion in rational terms as systems of ideas. He turned to believers themselves, and concluded that

[. . .] the real function of religion is not to make us think, to enrich our knowledge, nor to add to the conceptions which we owe to science, others of another origin and another character, but rather, it is to make us act, to aid us to live. The believer who has communicated with his god is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is *stronger*. *He feels within him more force, either to endure the trials of existence or to conquer them.*⁴⁰

Durkheim also said that the essence of religion was to be found in collective representations (shared images), and that the power or force that is sensed by believers is real, but is a reflection of these representations, not the objects to which they are attributed. Ritual

observances reinforce beliefs and give adherents a sense of shared strength and confidence. Rather than referring to National Socialists as “pragmatists,” which still implies some sort of strategic manipulation of information, a Durkheimian perspective would suggest the movement was fundamentally religious. According to Durkheimian thought, *Ewiger Wald* is not propaganda per se, but is rather religious proselytizing through celebrating the birth of an eternal nation. The forest from which this revolution drew its power was actually a “construct of imagination, projected onto trees” (to paraphrase Schama, above).

Second, the Durkheimian perspective on religion directs attention to practices, not just beliefs. Historical interpretation can be erroneous if it focuses on beliefs or knowledge alone. Failure to account for practices as well as ideas was amply illustrated by the controversy over Lynn White’s essay, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis.”⁴¹ But it is also evident in a superficial viewing of *Ewiger Wald*. The inspiring sentiments of “forest feeling” elicited by the film are not simply ideas stimulating aesthetic experiences. They also inspired and prepared people for actions ranging from war and conquest to ethnic cleansing. The “power” of these collective representations was embodied in non-ideological form in the majesty and pageantry of Nazi rallies. The sense of power associated with embracing a life “outside time” removed any sense of responsibility for causing human suffering.⁴²

Third, analysis of *Ewiger Wald* illustrates the persuasive power of reifications and the possible errors of historical description when reifications are taken for granted. Descriptions of nature are “constructs of imagination,” i.e., the objects of nature are often construed or interpreted within an abstract cognitive framework. And, according to Durkheim, even scientific descriptions often reflect religious outlooks on life. As a result, descriptions of nature cannot be taken as given, but must, instead, be deconstructed to discover who authored them and what led them to emphasize particular constructs over others. The “forest” in *Ewiger Wald* is just such a construction, especially because it is a reification of a mystical “nature” or “life itself.” Incorporation of *Dauerwald* forest practices in scenes of the film are presented as biological imperatives, as is the struggle for life, death, and rebirth that goes on in nature. Yet, as we have discovered, *Dauerwald*, as represented in Franz Heske’s book

German Forestry, reflects Nazi beliefs. And the death and rebirth cycle of individual organisms is generalized to include the life of the German people as a mystical collectivity.

Fourth, *Ewiger Wald* alerts us to the need to understand the relationship between science and spirit in historical contexts. The National Socialist religion of nature fused spiritual and scientific concerns by embedding science within a construct of naturalistic holism. The only science that was meaningful or useful was the science that conformed to pantheistic religious feelings about the “laws of life.”⁴³ To a certain extent, National Socialist ideology stemmed from the pantheistic rationalism of Ernst Haeckel, zoologist, father of ecology, and founder of the Monist League.⁴⁴ Haeckel’s monism, for Darré and other Nazis, provided an influential “over-arching belief system” because it legitimated the rejection of Christianity in favor of a monistic religion in which the nation was seen as the ultimate whole, worthy of worship and obligation.⁴⁵ The imminent spirit “discovered” by representing “life” through the construct of pantheistic rationalism and science was symbolized in *Ewiger Wald* by the “power” of the forest.

Finally, *Ewiger Wald* is useful for purposes of edification and pedagogy because it graphically illustrates the historical importance of myth and religion. Materialistic explanations predominate in the field of environmental history, most of which focus on physical conditions and biological events. *Ewiger Wald* reminds us that beliefs and their corresponding actions are often the most influential factors in social, political, and economic systems. The mystical power of the forest is ultimately not a figment of Nazi imagination to be dismissed by materialistic historians as irrelevant, but is instead a projection of the strength found in an emerging religion of nature—a religion that helped empower the Nazi revolution and brought death and destruction to most of Europe.

Notes

- 1 Robert A. Pois, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature* (London and Sydney: Groom Helm, 1986). Also see Anna Bramwell, *Ecology in the Twentieth Century: A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).

- 2 Pois, *ibid.*, 144, turns to Eliade to interpret how the architects of the new religious ideology sought to replace the transcendent Judeo-Christian God with a *Volk* that would transcend history. See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or, Cosmos and History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), 156. Pois explains how Hitler believed this myth of rebirth, since he had transcended history and convinced others that the horrible deeds necessary for transformation were non-events. From another perspective, it could be said that Hitler assumed the position of a god exercising raw will to give birth to a new Germany.
- 3 See, for example, James M. Rhodes, *The Hitler Movement: A Modern Millenarian Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980).
- 4 Robert A. Pois, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature*, especially Chapters 2 and 3.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 6 Emphasis on struggle in the face of enemies was a central concern of the Nazi religion of nature. Robert Pois, *ibid.*, 86, stated this as follows: "As the Nazis saw it, theirs was a 'revolution of the spirit' the primary purpose of which was to make Aryan man conscious of his place in a natural world filled with enemies."
- 7 Franz Heske, *German Forestry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938), 180-181.
- 8 Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 173.
- 9 Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 247.
- 10 See Jack Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 43ff.
- 11 David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema 1933-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 103-112.
- 12 Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics: The Roots of the Nazi mind* (New York: Capricorn, 1961), 19.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 108.
- 14 Cadars and Courtade, *Le cinéma Nazi* (Toulouse: Losefeld, 1971), 58.
- 15 Carl Maria Holzapfel, "Männer im Kampf um Gemeinschaft," *Kunst und Volk* 6 (June 1936): 203-204.
- 16 For more background on the Nazi *Kulturfilm* as a promotional tool of Nazi policies see Sabine Hake, *The Cinema's Third Machine: Writing on Film in Germany 1907-1933* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).
- 17 See especially, Robert Pois, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature*.

- 18 The production team traveled through and filmed in the following places: the Black Forest, the Bodensee region (Meersburg, Überlingen), in the Allgäu, Munich, Berchtesgarden, Mergentheim, Würzburg, Spessart, the Rhein region (Koblenz, Bingen), Mosel, and Eifel.
- 19 The image of two intertwined trees, in conjunction with comments on the weaving together of death and creation to represent an eternal nation, may hint at religious symbolism of a tree of knowledge, or more, pervasively, the eternal life force symbolized by a serpent coiled around a tree. This is a common symbol of immortality in a wide variety of cultures. See Roger Cook, *The Tree of Life: Image for the Cosmos* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 11 and 24. The formatting of poetry from the film follows the layout of the script.
- 20 G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation, Volume 1* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 56-57. The “forest feeling” in Germany was not necessarily a manifestation of an existing animistic religion discussed by van der Leeuw. To most Germans, the “power” of the forest had previously been symbolized by poetry, paintings, and aesthetic appreciation realized by visiting and walking through forests.
- 21 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 84-85. Also see van der Leeuw’s discussion of how Yggdrasil constituted a “world tree” embodying the secret of life and death, *ibid.*, 58. van der Leeuw also links the “world tree” to the Maypole.
- 22 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1959). Eliade describes this sacred space as the cosmological center of the world, generally represented by a pillar, mountain, tree, vine or other vertical objects. Also see van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*.
- 23 See Roger Cook, *The Tree of Life: Image of the Cosmos*, 108, for an illustration of European Maypole rituals in which “[t]hrough their dance, and in the weaving of the bands, the dancers actively participate in the re-creation of the cosmos, the weaving of the world.”
- 24 *Ibid.*, 157, emphasis in original. Eliade explains how the religious person experiences that “death is indissolubly linked with life.”
- 25 For a full discussion of National Socialism and its search for mythological roots, see Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 37-99. Schama’s discussion of Nazi reserves as sacred sites symbolizing immortality is especially relevant to an understanding of *Ewiger Wald*. Hermann Göring’s role in ordering the ethnic cleansing of “primeval” forests in Poland and protecting vast reserves for “Aryan” species of animals is especially instructive.

- 26 Ibid., 130, emphasis in original. Eliade, 135, also states, “Water is pre-eminently the slayer; it dissolves, abolishes all forms.” Eliade, 132-133, referred to the “multivalence of baptism,” and stated “The ‘old man’ dies through immersion in water, and he gives birth to a new regenerated being.”
- 27 Knowledge prohibited by Christian morality is to come from the forest, from the life of trees. See Roger Cook, *The Tree of Life: Image of the Cosmos*, 24.
- 28 See Alfons Arns, “Von Holstenwall nach Stehdingsehre: Walter Reimann, der deutsche Film und der Nationalsozialismus,” *Walter Reimann: Maler und Filmarchitekt*, ed. Hilmar Hoffmann and Walter Schobert (Frankfurt: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1997), 145. Reimanns views on filmmaking can be extrapolated from the following four articles: “Einiges über die Bedeutung des Films und der Filmindustrie,” *Neue Züricher Zeitung* 144 (Febr. 2, 1923): 1663; “Filmarchitektur—heute und morgen?,” *Filmtechnik und Filmindustrie* 2 (1926): 64-65; “Kleine Abhandlung über die Tüchtigkeit,” *Kultur-Wacht* 33 (1933): 11-12; “Was erwarten die Filmarchitekten vom deutschen Film?,” *Kultur-Wacht* 15 (1933): 5-6.
- 29 See Holzapfel, “Männer im Kampf um Gescheimschaft,” 203.
- 30 The authors presume this ambiguity was intended as part of the message, thus calling for a shift in faith from the church to nature’s laws, the forest.
- 31 Karsten Witte, *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, ed. Wolfgang Jacobson, Anton Kaes, and Horst Helmut Prinzler (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1993), 128.
- 32 C. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 56-57.
- 33 Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 173.
- 34 German forestry during the 1930’s emphasized a practice referred to as *Dauerwald*, or “continuous forest.” Forests were to be managed according to nature’s principles, with individual tree selection, removal of non-indigenous species, and rejection of market regulation that had been introduced early in the century. Also see, Franz Heske, *German Forestry*, 42-43.
- 35 Cleansing the forest served as a familiar analogy for implied ethnic cleansing because German foresters had embraced the “naturalistic” practice of *Dauerwald*. When explaining *Dauerwald*, Franz Heske, *ibid.*, 42, stated: “The *Dauerwald* doctrine, therefore, demands that clear-cutting be strictly avoided. Instead it postulates a single-tree-selection cutting [. . .]. If the poorest, slowest-growing, diseased, and defective trees are taken at each cutting, finally only the best ones remain.” Heske, 159, concluded his final discussion of *Dauerwald*

with the following philosophical observations: “No doubt there exists in the minds and in the hearts of many German foresters, though often unconsciously, a deep-lying connection between this naturalistic trend in the handling of the forest and the idealism inspired by the national renaissance of the German people, which, like the “good man” in Goethe’s *Faust*, is dimly conscious of following the right road in striving for a liberation of the deepest and ultimate sources of the national character, even though it may go astray through excess of holy zeal or human inadequacy.” See also Adalbert Ebner, *German Forests: Treasures of a Nation* (New York: German Library Information, 1940) and Friedrich Schnack, *Der deutsche Wald: Ein Bildwerk* (Bonn: Athenäum, 1954). *Dauerwald* practices ultimately proved impractical and biologically unsound, and were largely rejected after the end of WWII.

36 See Robert Pois, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature*, 50-51.

37 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 61.

38 Robert Pois, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature*, 50 and 110.

39 Cited in *ibid.*, 8-12.

40 Emile, Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), 463-464 (emphasis added).

41 Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207. White argued that the teachings of Western religion contributed to a disregard for the environment, especially the Biblical commandment to “multiply and subdue the earth.” A variety of scholars have sought to refute White’s argument, but none more convincingly than Jewish environmentalists who have recently argued that White erred by ignoring conservation practices obligated by Biblical covenants. See especially Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Ecology in a Biblical Perspective,” in *Torah of The Earth: Exploring 4,000 Years of Ecology in Jewish Thought*, Volume 1, ed. Arthur Waskow (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2000), 55-83.

42 See Robert Pois, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature*, 117-136.

43 *Ibid.*, 70-71.

44 See especially the contributions of Richard Walther Darré, Hitler’s Minister of Agriculture, summarized in Anna Bramwell, *Blood and Soil: Walther Darré and Hitler’s ‘Green Party’* (Buckinghamshire, England: Kensal, 1985).

45 Daniel Gasman, *Haeckel’s Monism and the Birth of Fascist Ideology* (New York: Peter Land, 1988). See Anna Bramwell, *Blood and Soil*, for a description of how Darre’s anti-church campaign stemmed from his affirmation of monism as a way for blending science and spirit.