

CHAPTER 11

Green Strands on the Silver Screen? Heimat and Environment in the German Cinema

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It is really not hard to think of German feature films that deal with serious issues of public debate. History, for example, has frequently been a concern of German film-makers: Rainer Werner Fassbinder's so-called 'FRG trilogy', Margarethe von Trotta's *Die bleierne Zeit* (The German Sisters), Alexander Kluge's *Die Patriotin* (The Patriot), Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland* (Our Hitler) spring instantly to mind. In the light of this, it is perhaps surprising that it is much harder to come up with a similar list of films which deal with the debates and the struggles that have taken place in the Federal Republic over the environment, despite the well-documented commitment to such issues (Riordan 1997b, Kolinsky, ed. 1989, Papadakis 1984). This is due in part to the close connection in film between themes and motifs which examine human interaction with the natural environment and the Heimat complex. Films dealing with environmental themes have often done so via the politically disputed Heimat genre, and no specifically green genre has emerged in feature films.¹ The political connotations of Heimat also meant that even in its critical form, this tainted genre had a rather limited appeal. As Bahlinger, Hellmuth and Reister put it, 'It seems that the directors themselves had problems with the Heimat concept. Nobody – except Reitz – actually intended to make a Heimat film as such.' (1989: 147). So in the 1970s and 1980s when environmental issues were at the centre of political debates in West Germany the (critical) Heimat film was a moderately successful vehicle for exploring environmental questions, yet made it difficult

for a more direct genre to emerge. In addition, from the mid to late 1980s an appetite for comedy meant that at the very height of public interest and concern for the environment, such issues were not obvious material for screenwriters. This in turn may be at least partly due to the nature of environmental activism in Germany, which has often grown out of grass-roots projects and regional campaigns, not perhaps lending itself to a large-scale fictional filmic treatment.²

In this chapter I shall examine approaches to broadly environmental issues in feature films which allude to the Heimat genre. I shall first discuss briefly how the concept of Heimat is connected with attitudes to the environment in the German-speaking world. I then discuss the construction of the physical environment in the 1930s Bergfilm (mountain film) and in the 1950s Heimat film. Following this, I shall look at the way canonical directors like Werner Herzog and Edgar Reitz appropriated the discourse of Heimat in the 1970s and 1980s to explore the interaction of human beings with their environment in a rather more critical mode. Finally I argue that the influence of the Heimat mode is still palpable in the 1990s and that this influence on constructions of the environment in film has meant that there is no neat fit between modern green politics and the critical Heimat film, but that a diverse range of competing discourses and influences from apocalyptic visions to a Romantic legacy to a utopia of clean technology inform both narratives and images.

Heimat and Environment

The Heimat movement, which gained popularity around the turn of the century, initially encompassed trivial literature, Heimat journals, and local societies seeking to protect their local area and promote the expression of Heimat identity. While essayists such as Adolf Bartels, Friedrich Lienhard and Julius Langbehn tended to take a reactionary line on the moral and spiritual superiority of the province over the degenerate city, and deplored the influence of, variously, modernity, racial alterity, or racial mixing, local Heimat societies had some rather more palatable concerns such as environmental protest against the more disfiguring effects of modernity in their vicinity.³

The concept of Heimat implies a sense of identity, roots and belonging. In historical terms, Germany's late unification meant that Heimat discourse functioned as a focus for identity which could negotiate between local, regional and national loyalties. At the centre of the Heimat complex is, then, the relationship of human

beings to their physical surroundings. Heimat resides in the investment made by people in the spaces where they live and work, especially where their work depends on the natural environment. Therefore it is easy to see both why Heimat societies became repositories for proto-environmental activism, but also why Heimat discourse could be appropriated for such dubious ends as a justification of colonialism, with the suggestion that land belonged to those who forged a relationship with it through their work.

1930s Mountain Films and 1950s Heimat Films

A popular and influential film genre, the mountain film emerged in the 1920s from the alpine documentary tradition. The genre was pioneered by Arnold Fanck, a director of such documentaries who turned to feature films, and later taken up with equal success by his two protégés, Luis Trenker and Leni Riefenstahl in the 1930s. Trenker continued to make mountain films and to publish illustrated accounts of his mountain career well after the war (Trenker 1961). For many urban cinema spectators in the Weimar Republic, mountain films represented their sole opportunity to experience, albeit vicariously, the extreme environments of the Alps. Indeed the mountain film is partly responsible for the popularisation of mountain regions as recreational spaces. The innovations in location filming in the face of very difficult conditions are certainly not to be underestimated and while there is still debate about the political symbolism of the mountain film, there is widespread recognition for the cinematic developments Fanck and others achieved, which represent a major contribution to the otherwise largely studio-bound Weimar film industry (see Rapp 1997, Bechtold-Comforty et al. 1989: 43-53, Amann et al. 1992).

Creating a narrative to supplement spectacular cinematic shots of Alpine mountains normally meant that a climbing disaster had to feature, followed by a daring rescue. In these films therefore in their purest form there is often an emphasis on the conquest of a beautiful but dangerous environment, with the male hero pitted against the vagaries of the mountains and nature. The climbers are clearly differentiated from ordinary folk who live in harmony with their rural Heimat, farming the land at the foot of the mountain. Climbers are often characterised as courageous but driven; they break out of the Heimat contract of harmony and seek to conquer Nature. The mountain environment exists as a challenge to their masculine power. This is not to suggest that they are always represented negatively, nor is the rural Heimat shown as repressive. It is, however, often figured as a feminine domain, the hearth to

which men might return, but from whence they are also challenged to strike out.

Das blaue Licht (The Blue Light, dir. Leni Riefenstahl 1932) is one of the clearest examples of the environment divided into mediated, cultivated Heimat and pure, wild Nature. The village scenes show a traditional Heimat lifestyle, where the only threat to the rural community is a mysterious blue light from the mountain which appears to call to young men like a Siren to leave their homes and climb a sheer face to find the source of the light. They inevitably fail and fall to their deaths. Junta, an outsider and 'wild woman' played by Riefenstahl, is blamed for this, since she is thought to be a witch. However, a visiting artist finally discovers her secret route to a mountain chamber where a wonderful natural treasure-trove of crystals reflecting moonlight creates the seductive light. However, when he reveals his discovery the villagers arrive en masse to take as many crystals as they can. Their wealth from the exploitation of the natural riches of the mountain is achieved at the expense not only of the mountain itself: it also destroys Junta. Distraught at the sight of the disfigured chamber, she falls to her death. The mountain is here clearly identified with Junta: its rape is equated with an attack on her body and leaves her unable to carry on living. The specific prohibition on mining natural resources is often expressed in terms of the violation of a woman's body.⁴ Indeed the figuration of woman as being perhaps metonymically associated with Heimat and by implication with nature persists through almost all the twists and turns of the Heimat genre, even into Edgar Reitz's otherwise quite critical re-reading (Kahlenberg et al. 1985: 103).

In *Die Weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü* (Prisoners of the Mountain, dir. Arnold Fanck and G.W. Pabst 1929) the astonishing beauty of the mountain environment is coupled with terrible dangers: most of the mountaineers attempting to climb Piz Palü die. Dr Johannes Krafft loses his wife in a climbing accident immediately after being warned by his guide to curb his flippant attitude, which is apparently punished by the mountain. Two further disasters – the death of five students, and the accident which leads to Krafft, Maria (Riefenstahl) and her husband Heinz being trapped on a ledge – are also clearly due to over-ambitious and competitive behaviour. The students are keen to beat Krafft to the top, and so take a dangerous route blindly trusting that there will be no avalanche. Heinz (jealous after being forced to share the straw bed in the mountain hut with Krafft as well as his wife) insists on leading, to counter Maria's admiration of Krafft's skill. His lack of experience, however, causes the accident which eventually leads to Krafft's sacrificial death.

In contrast to the competitive young men, whose desire is simply conquest, whether of the mountain or Riefenstahl, Krafft has learned his lesson and has developed a particular affinity for this dangerous environment, so that he becomes more like the villagers, who are both knowledgeable about, and respectful towards, the mountain. Indeed, he goes beyond their respectful distance to become something of a 'spirit of the mountain' who wanders ceaselessly and rather obsessively on the slopes, tormented by the death of his wife. He finally finds peace by being left to die on the mountain rather than be rescued, supposedly sacrificing himself so that the young couple might survive, but mainly as a response to his own desire to become one with the mountain, frozen into its contours like his wife, whose body is also encapsulated in ice. Krafft's decision to remain on the mountain to die is his final journey towards a spiritual destiny of mystical unity with the mountain and by implication with his dead wife. Only in death it seems can there be a truly harmonious relationship between the male climber and his wild surroundings, equal to that of the wild woman in *Das blaue Licht*, who embodied the spirit of the mountain, and was so closely tied to the fate of her natural domain that she died when its mystical heart was ripped out.

Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü and *Das blaue Licht* rather ambiguously figure the wild mountain environment as a mystical locale infused with Romantic grandeur which separates it from the homely comforts of the tamed Heimat. Fanck, Trenker and Riefenstahl deliberately evoked the imagery and compositions of Romantic painters such as Caspar David Friedrich (Jacobs 1992: 32–35). This ultimately amounts to a rather problematic adulation of the mountain which certainly has its derivation in the early texts of such dubious Heimat prophets as Bartels, Lienhard and Langbehn. Mountain film aesthetics were also influential in the later development of a more explicit fascist aesthetic: Riefenstahl's infamous opening to *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will, 1935) showing Hitler apparently descending from the clouds owes much to shots designed by Fanck and also used by Riefenstahl. Siegfried Kracauer saw the mountain film as feeding into Nazi mythology in that it emphasised antirationalism, the lure of the elemental, and the value of sacrifice for a higher cause (Kracauer 1947: 110–12). However, in Fanck and Riefenstahl the alpine environment is not merely something to be conquered. The prohibition on mining implicit in *Das blaue Licht* is reminiscent of conceptions of Gaia in nature cults and certain strands of today's mythically-coloured environmentalism (Sheldrake 1990). Similarly *Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü* emphasises the importance of respect for the mountain, as opposed to the complacent competitiveness of boy climbers who

need to be taught a lesson. The films of Luis Trenker, however, are frequently rather more macho in mood, marginalising women characters and aggrandising the male climber, played by Trenker of course, who conquers the peaks and returns to the village to claim his Heimat maiden.⁶ In *Der Berg ruft* (The Call of the Mountain, 1937) Trenker plays an Italian climber, Carrell, who plans to ascend the Matterhorn with Edward Whymper. Caught between various national interests which manifest themselves in an argument about whether they should begin their attempt from Switzerland or Italy, they climb separately. Whymper is first to the top, but is blamed for the deaths of some of his team members. Only Carrel can prove his innocence by finding the frayed rope that was allegedly cut. He risks his life to do this and the two friends finally climb the Matterhorn together. The central narrative of the film is the conquest of the mountain, first by Whymper, whose team nevertheless suffers fatal casualties on the return. This serves to render the second conquest by Carrel to save Whymper's reputation – solo and in foul conditions – even more heroic. The eventual victory of the hero over the mountain both saves the male bond between climbers and proves his worth to Felicitas, who has stuck by him when others doubted. In *Piz Palü*, the ambitious climb is never completed – rescue and a longed-for death on the mountain provide the denouement.

The key environmental problem looking retrospectively at these Alpine features is tourism – even as the beautiful images delight the urban public, they open up a fragile ecosystem to significant risk of degradation. The problem of mountain tourism as environmental threat, however, is not obvious in the 1920s and 1930s, with the possible exception of Riefenstahl's *Das blaue Licht*, where the artist, a well-meaning but naïve tourist, has initiated the destruction of the crystal chamber. Indeed in *Der verlorene Sohn* (The Prodigal Son, dir. Luis Trenker 1934), the criticism of the American woman who wants to be a mountaineer and nearly tempts Tonio from his true Heimat maiden centres on xenophobic anxiety about the incursion of the foreign into the Heimat, rather than a specific concern about the environment.

By the 1950s, the aesthetically innovative yet politically dubious mountain films, with their divisions between Heimat hearth and wild nature, had given way to ideologically conservative Heimat films, in which a rather sanitised view of rural spaces was sometimes opposed to the city, and sometimes to an idea of modernity. The lack of direct discussion of environmental dilemmas in 1950s Heimat films is hardly surprising, given that one of the key aims of the studios was to promote rural parts of Germany as holiday destinations (Rippey et al. 1996: 151–55). As the 1950s wore on,

the dream of holidays and motor cars could be realised by more and more citizens, and Heimat films became serious shop windows for German resorts, alongside their other ideological functions of providing harmony and reconciliation for displaced populations, disrupted families, and alienated generations (Koch et al. 1989: 69–95). The potential for degradation of the very environment tourists come to see is rarely touched on in Heimat films. Cars for example, as an important object of desire in the consumer-oriented 1950s, must feature, though usually without any indication of potential damage to the beautiful surroundings. Two examples of 1950s films which do obliquely reflect environmental concern instead of just showing a rural Heimat untouched by modernity are *Dort oben, wo die Alpen glühen* (Up Where the Alps Are Glowing, dir. Otto Meyer 1956) and *Der Förster vom Silberwald* (The Gamekeeper of the Silver Forest, dir. Alfons Stummer 1954). In the former, the detrimental effects of tourism are discussed explicitly, with much discussion over the building of a new road which, it is argued, will bring many more visitors into the area and boost the local economy. There is a clear critique of those who stand to gain from this development. Tourism itself is shown in its best and worst aspects in two visitors, whose actions illustrate the dilemma facing rural communities. The likes of the young woman mountaineer, who respects the local environment and traditions, might cautiously be welcomed, but not her uncle, a comic figure, who seeks only to assert his superiority over local people and landscapes.

In *Der Förster vom Silberwald* there is an emphasis on the conservation of habitats by hunters and gamekeepers. This is opposed in the film to certain economic interests in the local community, where some would like to sell timber rights to the Silberwald. Though hunting has the macho overtones of conquest evident in Trenker's mountain conquests, and today its claims to conservation and the protection of wildlife have been challenged, the management of habitat by a gamekeeper is preferred in the film to the outside exploitation of the woodlands, which would threaten the destruction of a valuable habitat. The film's plot has Liesl torn between a Heimat life and the love of Gerold the gamekeeper, and a bohemian existence in Vienna living with an artist. The artist attempts to prove himself to her by engaging in country pursuits such as shooting. However, his lack of knowledge of Heimat ways finds him out, as in his ignorance he shoots a prize stag. Gerold generously covers for him, resigning from his post in the process. (His noble gesture does, however, win him the girl.) Again the thematic concern with conservation emerges from a suspicion of the outsider which is a staple of Heimat films. However, an irony of production is that *Der Förster vom Silberwald* was conceived originally as a promotional

nature film to boost tourism in the area. It was only later given a plot as it was felt that it might then be even more effective (Seidl 1987: 82–3). After all, then, the meddling townies are wanted in the Heimat – or at least their much-needed money is, if the community is not to sell out to timber companies. The have-your-cake-and-eat-it approach of the 1950s films thus neatly if unintentionally encapsulates a key environmental dilemma: tourism threatens local environments but might save rural communities financially, and it means that beautiful habitats must be maintained so that there is something for tourists to admire. However, the destructive effects of mass tourism on these very habitats are only faintly alluded to, if at all.

Herzog and Reitz: The New Heimat Film

Following the angry rejection of the province in anti-Heimat films such as Peter Fleischmann's *Jagdscenen aus Niederbayern* (Hunting Scenes from Lower Bavaria, 1969) and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Katzelmacher* (1969), the 1970s saw a more differentiated approach as a political culture of environmentalism gathered momentum in the Federal Republic, fuelled both by the aftermath of the 1968 student revolt – which Colin Riordan identifies as feeding directly into the modern German Green Party (1997a: 32) – and by the growing interest in grass-roots democracy and local citizens' initiatives (Bahlinger et al. 1989: 146–47). New Heimat films emerged that did not utterly reject the province but were aesthetically and politically far from the reductive transmission of ideology that had been apparent in the 1950s films. Werner Herzog's films are politically ambiguous and suggestive of the kind of mystical attitude to nature that is evident in *Das blaue Licht* and *Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü*. They have aroused controversy for their sometimes bizarre experimental methods, such as the decision to film *Herz aus Glas* (Heart of Glass, 1976) with the entire cast bar Josef Bierbichler under hypnosis, and Herzog became notorious for exploitative behaviour in Peru during the making of *Fitzcarraldo* (1982). He went on in 1984 at the height of the German Green movement to make *Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen* (Where the Green Ants Dream), a film set in the Australian outback which directly thematises environmental concerns. However, even a relatively sympathetic critic like Thomas Elsaesser notes that Herzog's representation of native peoples is problematic (1986: 149).⁷

Herz aus Glas is a critical Heimat film, but not in the mode of Schlöndorff's *Der plötzliche Reichtum der armen Leute von Kombach* (The Sudden Wealth of the Poor People of Kombach, 1970), which

uses authentic historical documents to narrate a story of exploitation. It is by comparison rather vague in its evocation of time (pre-modern) and place (Bavarian forests and language). In his evocative images of misty pasture, forests and the herding of cattle, Herzog recalls certain stock images of the Heimat film. However, landscape shots – wide horizons, swirling clouds and dramatic skies – are most often associated with the character of Hias, the shepherd-seer, and perform quite a different function to that in 1950s Heimat films, where natural surroundings are often rather anodyne and comforting, rather than unsettlingly mystical. The film concerns the aftermath of the death of a craftsman, the only person to know the formula for a highly-prized ruby glass. The owner of the glass factory desperately seeks written evidence of the formula, and also tries to reconstruct it himself. His obsessive quest leads him in his insanity to murder his servant girl, believing that her blood is the secret of the formula. Finally he burns down the glass factory, thus fulfilling one of Hias's prophecies. The apocalyptic vision of the clash of civilisation and nature is reminiscent of the environmental pessimism to be found in other critical Heimat texts, most notably those of Herbert Achternbusch, who wrote the script for *Herz aus Glas*.⁸ But while Herzog might be the most serious candidate for a film-maker who reflects the widespread urgency about environmental issues evident in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, his films are scarcely environmental campaign material; indeed while his interest in nature and landscape has inspired the admiration of American film-makers like Francis Ford Coppola, his attitude to the landscapes he so powerfully represents is not one of an earnest conservationist. He resisted strongly the suggestion that *Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen* should be read as just an environmental film, and he often suggests in his narratives and images that pure, wild nature is something sinister and dangerous. There is not really a sense of a fragile ecosystem that needs care and protection (Cheesman 1997: 292). His films do however open up the landscape to a grand vision and then thematise the relationship of 'culture' or 'civilisation', or even the individual, with the natural surroundings. Landscape dominates *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (Aguirre, the Wrath of God, 1972): 'before there is character there is landscape', as Dana Benelli puts it (1986: 92). The film opens with an extreme long shot of the mountain slowly revealing a tiny chain of human beings descending to the river. As the conquistadores undertake their journey down the Amazon they are constantly at risk from the dangers of the mysterious and frightening jungle environment, be it dangerous river eddies or deadly fevers, even as they occasionally marvel at some natural wonder, like the butterfly that sits happily on a shoulder and the baby

mammals that Aguirre shows to his daughter. Herzog does not stop at the earthly environment and its effects on humans – he also develops a cosmic perspective with the sky and specifically the sun suggested as a kind of father to the conquistadores: they are (mis)recognised as ‘sons of the Sun’ by the Indians who approach their boat, and in the final sequence where Aguirre is apparently the last person alive on the raft, a shot of the sun immediately follows his cry of ‘Who is with me?’ (Benelli 1986: 93).

Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen is a more apparently straightforward environmental narrative. The attempt by Aborigines to defend their sacred lands from white mining interests draws on the ancient and culturally widespread prohibition on mining the earth as a violation of an established natural order. But Herzog resisted the idea that his film could be read as simply a green fable:

I don’t see it as an environmental film, it’s on a much deeper level: how people are dealing with this earth. It would be awful to see this film only as a film on ecology. It has a common borderline with that [but] it’s also a film on a strange mythology, the green ants mythology. It’s a movie, that’s the first thing. (cit. Elsaesser 1986: 136)

Ecology of course has at its heart ‘how people are dealing with this earth’. This relationship is central to Herzog’s films, and so they do constitute an exploration of attitudes, images and myths that are part of an environmental awareness. However, they certainly resist categorisation as ecological films, and have little to do with the politics of environmental protest, even in the case of *Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen*. In a complex anthropological gesture the Aborigines are simultaneously the object of Herzog’s western camera eye and autonomous subjects. As Elsaesser argues, there is an inversion of the ostensible view, so that even as we look at them we see civilisation, capital, and the geologist Lance Hackett from their perspective (1986: 145). In his figuration of the Aborigines Herzog implies a response to natural surroundings that goes beyond the 1970s and 1980s politics of environmental protection to depict the Aborigines, not just as ‘protesters’ hoping to guard the environment in the way of western greens, but as a part of the earth itself:

Aborigines are the rocks you have to move away. They understand themselves as a part of the earth... That’s why a man like Sam Woolagoocha said to me one day: ‘They have ravaged the earth and don’t they see they have ravaged my body?’ That explains everything ... they are the rocks, they are the trees and you’d have to shoot them first, or blast them, before they would move. It has nothing to do with modern ‘sit-in’ techniques. (cit. Elsaesser 1986: 146–47)

So beyond the radicalism even of today’s New Age environmental protesters, the radical identification of the Aborigines with the earth means that Herzog’s film cannot after all be neatly coopted for green politics, for in this very identification lies the (for western liberals)

uncomfortable representation of the Aborigines as somehow reified, lacking 'inner life' (Elsaesser 1986: 146), moved by Herzog in front of his camera just as the mining company seeks to move them out of the way (Elsaesser 1986: 149).

This uneasy and potentially dubious representation of human interaction or identification with nature is key to understanding in what sense Herzog is or is not relevant to debates about cultural constructions of the environment. In his films he pursues a vision of nature quite different to the idea of fragile ecosystem under threat. Nature is not only opposed to civilisation in his films, in some it threatens symbolically to destroy civilisation, as in *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* and *Herz aus Glas*, in a reverse of the green vision of apocalypse. In *Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen* as in other Herzog films, critique of western civilisation is palpable in the mythological reading of Nature, which opens up Herzog's bombastic landscapes to the criticism that he is reverting to the dubious irrationalism that Kracauer identified in the mountain films of the 1920s and 1930s. The anthropological identification with the Other of civilisation is similarly problematic. Herzog's use of powerfully incongruous symbols of technology in his documentary-style landscapes (mining machinery, the military plane in the desert) adds weight to the view that his films reveal an antirational visionary aesthetic,⁹ presenting a natural world that can only be approached by civilisation's others, or by the megalomaniacs who sacrifice their sanity for some sort of mythological unity with nature.

Herzog, then, for all his documentary vision and ability to direct the natural landscape, does not make films which fit neatly into the green politics of the 1970s and 1980s. They do not present the environment as something to be conserved and guarded – the natural world is in his films something uncompromising and dangerous which involves terrible risks for civilisation. Though it is possible to make a case for his representation of other cultures (Elsaesser 1986, Benelli 1986), it is easy to see why he has offended western liberals and the western left so often with his anthropological approach. His apocalyptic visions, his dominant and dangerous landscapes, interwoven with myths that structure human approaches to the natural Other, nonetheless challenge the viewer to consider the clash between nature and civilisation in ways that are more radical than the 1970s and 1980s green rhetoric of environmental protection.

Herzog's overt suspicion of technology in *Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen* does have ambiguous undercurrents in the representation of the monstrous aeroplane in the desert which for all its incongruity has a status as object of desire.¹⁰ Mistrust of technology and the implied critique of civilisation might be allied to a Romantic

strand in green thought, a legacy which is contested in modern green politics. In the same year as Herzog's *Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen*, Edgar Reitz's ambitious family saga *Heimat* (1984) considered the relationship within Heimat between nature and technology, in a realist mode that manages to indicate some of the green dilemmas and tentatively suggest how they might be solved. From the very first episode of the saga, set in 1919, to its end in 1982, the impact of technology on the specific rural context is evident in the narrative as well as in the filmic images of the natural and built environment of the Hunsrück. In the 1950s Heimat, modern technology (with the notable exception of the car) appears to belong elsewhere, and tends not to encroach on nature shots that function as eye-candy for those stuck in cities undergoing reconstruction. In *Heimat* even landscape shots reveal the revolution in communications, in that telegraph wires and poles often divide the shot and the low hum of the wires can be heard. The saga shows how the rural community is connected with the rest of the nation by the late but then rather rapid arrival of communications technology. Radios, telephones, cars, and even motorways become part of the fabric of the Heimat as military ambition forces the pace of rural modernisation.

Heimat carefully reveals the Janus face of modern technology: the utopian potential of new technologies appears alongside a clear indication that the militarisation behind them will result in the betrayal of that potential. Thus when Ernst flies over the village to drop carnations for Anton's bride at her proxy wedding, the image will flicker for the viewer from the utopian potential and sheer beauty of flight to the violence of military bombing campaigns. In revealing the ambiguities of technological advance and exploring the interaction of modernity and the rural Heimat, Reitz is not simply engaging with the rural environment as threatened and fragile nature, but is looking particularly at Heimat as a site of human activity and network of social relations. The notion of environmental threat in the form of inappropriate developments is clearly present, indeed the rehabilitation of Heimat in the 1980s as a centre of identity worthy of recuperation is partly dependent on the growing interest post-1968 in ecology. However, Reitz also envisages a negotiation in rural spaces between conservation and the need for a local economy, often suggesting that technology's Janus face might be a potential saviour as well as destroyer of the environment.¹¹

In Reitz's postwar sections, for example, the villain is not industry, but agriculture. The one former SS man in the village, Wilfried Wiegand, is the biggest landowner in the area, and his unseemly enthusiasm for agro-chemicals is set against Anton's clean

optics factory. Anton deliberately places his factory in the Hunsrück environment because optics production requires clean air and argues bitterly with Wiegand, whose pesticide spraying forces Anton to stop production. The optics factory provides a considerable amount of skilled work for local people, in contrast to Wiegand, who merely pollutes the atmosphere and makes virtually no investment in the local economy. Anton's factory, which operates in harmony with the local environment, suggests not a simplistic ideal of preserving the Hunsrück as nature intended, but a more complex engagement with the local environment which takes into account the need for a sustainable local economy. Anton is no hero, environmental or otherwise – far from it, for his arrogance and intolerance draw him into conflict with the sympathetic Hermann – but he does hold out against the hostile bid of a multinational company, maintaining his focus on Research and Development and high-quality, small-scale production. His fragile success suggests, albeit rather tentatively, that rural areas need not simply be either agro-prairies or nature reserves, but that a careful expansion of a mixed rural economy could provide decent employment and still respect the environment.

In a further key contrast in attitudes to the rural Heimat, the avant-garde composer Hermann is set against his brother Ernst, the former Luftwaffe pilot. Both are rather alienated from the Heimat and experience their rural background as somewhat stifling, but Hermann responds by making sound recordings of the natural environment (birdsong) and creating a concrete, alienated Heimat music which expresses his debt to the natural and social site of identity but in the same gesture transcends it. Hermann functions as a kind of alter ego for the director Reitz, who it is implied is also involved in expressing respectful indebtedness and yet desire for transcendence born of a critical and differentiated appraisal of Heimat. Ernst's response to his locality is cynical rather than critical: he cons villagers out of their valuable antiques and literally dismantles the fabric of the Heimat, selling traditional rustic façades to theme bars in nearby cities. The heritage industry is certainly not an answer to the problems of local economies – Reitz displays a proper concern that the built as well as the natural environment should be respected, while satirising the modish (urban) desire for rustic chic. His critique is levelled not only at the absurdity of Düsseldorf theme bars, but also at a more serious example of heritage conservation, namely the wealthy Paul's bestowal of museum status on the family home, which is staged as pompous and faintly ludicrous.

The rural environment exists then in this more subtle Heimat film as a natural space under threat, a source of artistic inspiration, which even in the late twentieth century cannot be ignored, and

finally as a place of social identity where the challenge is to find a livelihood for local people that might harmonise with the needs of the environment. Reitz weighs up critical Heimat art against heritage, and tries to envisage a green economy that could benefit the community as against earlier conceptions of an environment that had to be conquered, consumed or protected. His grappling, however tentative, with the notion of rural environment as a space to live and work is an interesting contemporary counterpoint to Herzog's exploration of apocalypse, mythology and cosmic mysticism.

In the 1990s, as green issues became more mainstream, environmental strands in films have become integrated into a range of different films which are not primarily films about ecological subject matter. At the same time, the mode of representing environmental concern has become rather more fragmented. Ecological concerns are evident in a number of films from the eco-disaster *Nach uns die Sintflut* (After Us the Deluge, dir. Siggie Rothmund 1991) to documentaries like *Die Wismut* (Wismut, dir. Volker Koepp 1993), emerging from the GDR tradition of documentary filmmaking, and as a caricatured *Szene* backdrop to the irritating comedy *Härtetest* (Trial by Fire, dir. Janek Rieke 1997). In a more serious mode, Hans-Christian Schmid's *23* (1998) also has the radical eco-protest scene as part of its context for examining the life of the young hacker Karl Koch. Even in recent work, however, one of the most important vehicles for examining the social context of interaction between people and sensitive environments remains the Heimat mode.

Tom Tykwer's 1997 film *Winterschläfer* (Winter Sleepers) alludes to the mountain film tradition and shows a traditional rural family failing to thrive after the disaster of losing a child in an accident. Tourism and particularly skiing are now fantastically more lucrative than farming. The farmhouse interior, reminiscent of Wilhelm Leibl's paintings, is contrasted with the luxury house plus indoor swimming pool of the ski resort manager. Here too the issue of how a local community can survive economically while still retaining a distinct character is an issue. Tourism and skiing bring work and money but have an uncomfortable impact on a small community. However, traditional rural industries do not seem to be realistic options for the four main characters in the film – a nurse, a translator, a ski instructor, the projectionist of a local cinema. The mountains are filmed with the same aesthetic care as in the earlier mountain films (missing from the vast majority of the 1950s Heimat films) and *Winterschläfer* echoes too the mystical longing for oneness with the mountains in death seen in *Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü*. Marco, the ski instructor whose complicated sex life brings nothing

but misery, finally achieves an ecstatic moment of unity with the mountains as he falls to his death; the staging and editing of the fall suggest that Marco has achieved an everlasting moment of epiphany as shots of his accident are stretched out between shots of other characters living their lives over the next year or so.

While it is difficult to think of a specific body of films which deal explicitly with environmental thinking, ecological dilemmas and debates have often been expressed through the medium of the genre of the Heimat film, which has as one of its core concerns the interaction between human community and spatial location. This filmic tradition, which has existed since the mountain films of the Weimar Republic, was most closely associated with culturally conservative or even fascist politics until its appropriation by the left in a critical mode in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The dubious political tradition of the genre has meant that there is not always a particularly neat fit between post-1968 green politics and the critical Heimat films of Herzog, Reitz, Achternbusch, and latterly Tykwer, but in narratives, mise-en-scène and aesthetic style their films have drawn on some of the most diverse strands of green and proto-green thinking: the mythological prohibition on mining; the mystical desire for oneness with the mountains; Nature as Romantic ideal; a cosmic-scale vision of apocalypse; the powerful symbolism of dying forests; the dilemma of how a local community might interact harmoniously with a sensitive environment and yet still make a living. These films resist categorising as ecological or green films, but cultural and political environmentalism and proto-environmentalism are clearly an influential context, without which their diverse reflections on human interaction with nature remain difficult to understand. Conversely, their different visual conceptions of environment challenge spectators to think of the environment in ways that are complex and radical and go beyond the scope of much modern green campaigning.

Notes

1. An interesting source of information about documentary and other films dealing with environmental issues is the Ökomeidia international film festival held annually in Freiburg im Breisgau. Non-German films outnumbered German films, however, in the 1999 competition, and most of the prizes were awarded to documentaries. See Internet <<http://www.oekomeidia-institut.de/FESTIVAL/index.html>>.
2. Environmental debates in feature films in the 1970s and 1980s must also be seen alongside contemporary successes in documentary film-making, though there is not space to discuss these films in detail here. Such films were often broadcast on television, causing a much more palpable public impact than New German Cinema critical Heimat films. A notable documentary feature film in the eco-disaster mode is *Smog* (dir. Wolfgang Petersen 1973). I am grateful for Markus Kellermann for discussing these issues with me.

3. For examples of this tendency and a defence of Heimat societies based on their proto-green activism, see Rollins (1996) and Jefferies (1997).
4. See Carolyn Merchant 1983: 29–41. Hartmut Böhme also explores in detail the early modern characterisation of mining as the rape and matricide of Mother Earth. His 1988 book *Natur und Subjekt* is out of print but can be consulted on the Internet. See the chapter ‘Geheime Macht im Schoß der Erde: Das Symbolfeld des Bergbaus zwischen Sozialgeschichte und Psychohistorie’, <<http://www.culture.hu-berlin.de/HB/Texte/natsub/geheim.html>>, especially pages 5–8 and 26–7 of 57.
5. Eric Rentschler argues that the horror of nature defiled competes as a discourse in *Das blaue Licht* with the awareness of the commercial potential of the crystals for the villagers (1986: 171–173).
6. One of Trenker’s most famous films, *Berge in Flammen* (Mountains in Flames, 1931), was allegedly adapted from a screenplay of Fanck’s entitled *Die schwarze Katze* (The Black Cat). Based on the experiences of Fanck’s cameraman Schneeberger in the First World War, it would have told the story of a woman skier and climber who risked her life to warn Austrian soldiers in a remote mountain base of an impending attack by the Italians. In Trenker’s version the woman character is replaced by a male hero, played by Trenker himself (Riefenstahl 1992: 72–3).
7. For a hostile critique of Herzog as neocolonialist, see Davidson 1993; for a differentiated and perceptive defence see Koepnick 1993 and Cheesman 1997.
8. Achternbusch also works in the critical Heimat mode: in his 1984 film *Wanderkrebis* (The Spreading Cancer) he contemplates the environmental cause célèbre of the dying forest. He incorporates elements both of black humour and visual poetry, and in contrast to Edgar Reitz’s tentative attempt in *Heimat* to reconcile the interests of environment and community, *Wanderkrebis* ends pessimistically with a lyrical sequence showing the suicide of the protagonist and his partner in a devastated forest (Pflaum and Prinzler 1992: 73–76).
9. Herzog is certainly indebted to the mountain film tradition – Rentschler suggests that *Herz aus Glas* perpetuates Riefenstahl’s irrationalism in *Das blaue Licht*, which he associates with the elemental mythology of National Socialism (1986: 170–74).
10. See Leo Marx 1964 on the juxtaposition in literature of iconic symbols of industrial power such as the steam locomotive and an idealised natural landscape.
11. Luis Trenker has a perhaps surprisingly positive view of the use of technology in Alpine areas, as long as it is needed, and is integrated carefully; he criticises the tendency amongst some mountain climbers to demand that such regions be kept more or less as living museums and that local people be expected to manage without the modern conveniences the rest of us have come to rely on (Trenker 1961: 78–87, esp. 86).