Human-Nature Relations in German Literature: A Curated Stroll through a History of Entanglement

Sabine Wilke

This virtual exhibition features, in English translation, short excerpts from German-language literary texts that address human-nature entanglements. The aim is to show how literature can contribute to understanding and problematizing the relation between humans and nonhuman nature. What aspects of human-nature relations are addressed, at what point in literary history, and how are they shaped poetically? *This virtual exhibition is also available in German here.*

Introduction to the Exhibition

Transformation of Landscapes

Mountains, Glaciers, Climate

Forests and Deforestation

Pollution and Waste

Further Reading

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Introduction to the Exhibition

As the prominent postwar German-language writer Christa Wolf wrote in her novel about the 1986 nuclear accident in Chernobyl, referencing the title of Joseph Conrad's novel on the European colonial tradition, literary texts have the ability to look right into the "heart of darkness" of our civilization and zoom in on our blind spots. Especially fiction can give shape to ideas that we seldom acknowledge in reality or that we prefer to repress. For these reasons and more, literature is an excellent platform for reflecting on the topic of human-nature relations, especially their more problematic aspects. This topic receives particular attention in a great number of literary texts of the German tradition.

An urban forest in Jakarta, Indonesia. Photograph by Yogas Design.

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The aim of this virtual exhibition is to show how literature can make an important contribution to understanding and problematizing the relation between humans and nonhuman nature. In particular, it asks,

> how has German-language literature and culture of the last two hundred years represented and, through these representations, shaped the relationship between humans and nature? Which aspects of that relationship come into play, at what point in time, and in what poetic form?

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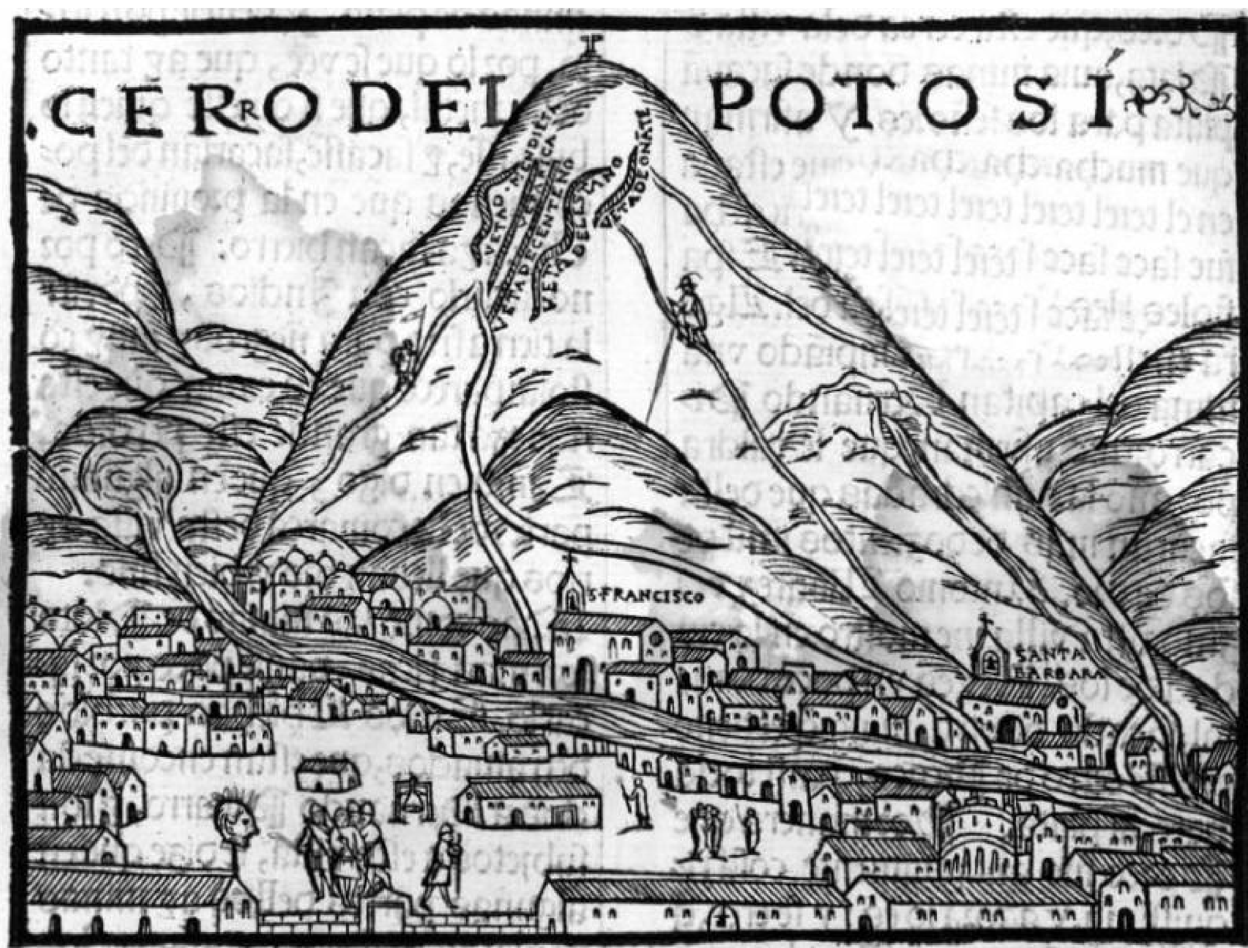
The exhibition is conceived as a “curated stroll” through the German-language literary and cultural tradition of the last two centuries, along which select examples invite critical reflection on the relationship between humans and nature, or “ecocriticism.” The story that emerges from that tradition is a story of deep entanglements, of melancholy about the increasing problems with our environment, and at times even open criticism of the increasing scale and nature of these developments. A modular structure and poetic approach guide this “stroll” through literary history. For those who wish to continue their journeys, a list with further readings about ecocriticism and the environmental humanities is provided.

The first signs of a literary sensitivity about human and nature entanglements can be detected in the nineteenth century, which is one of the reasons older literary texts are featured alongside modern and more contemporary examples. While this exhibition lacked space for many contemporary examples, this is hopefully offset by the historical trajectory it aims to reveal.

Scientists have recently started to call the human-nature entanglement that has intensified over the last 250 years and resulted in the Industrial Revolution, the proliferation of nuclear technology, and global trade in an ever more globally connected economy the “Anthropocene.” This is a term for an age in which humans feature as agents on a geological scale with the ability to alter the Earth’s atmospheric systems. In 2014–2016, the Deutsches Museum in Munich, in collaboration with the Rachel Carson Center of Environment and Society, organized the first exhibition on this topic and a companion virtual exhibition .

This virtual exhibition on literary sources is designed as a complementary resource, to offer deeper understanding of the cultural dimensions of the Anthropocene. It is organized in four chapters, each of which highlights a different aspect of human-nature entanglement with five to seven literary examples. While it focuses on four themes, topics such as water, food, and the relationship between human and nonhuman nature beg exploration, as well. Perhaps these topics will become part of a more comprehensive approach at a later stage in the project.

Unless noted otherwise, English translations of German source material are by the virtual exhibition curator.



Sixteenth-century illustration of the Bolivian city Potosí, from *Crónica del Perú*. Pedro Cieza de León, 1553.

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1. Transformation of landscapes: Humans have altered landscapes from the very beginning of civilization. With Europe's expansion into the New World and across the globe during the colonial era, more radical and systematic transformations of landscapes have occurred, leading to ever-increasing trade, growing need for transportation, unprecedented population growth, the spread of industrial agriculture, rapid technological advancements, and ever-intensifying extraction of natural resources.

The German Romantic poets still welcomed the importance of mining and the significance of minerals as a counterweight to the rational exploitation of nature in the Enlightenment.

The well-known German poet, novelist, playwright, and scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, however, in his famous play *Faust*, positioned his protagonist on the threshold of an attitude toward nature that is less romantic and much more attuned with finding modern technological solutions to environmental problems. In the end,

however, Faust is punished for his technological hubris.

Mid-nineteenth-century realist authors, on the other hand, started focusing on the more problematic aspects of human-nature entanglements such as encroaching human settlements and the expansion of transportation systems. Modern and contemporary literature, finally, feature the destructive extent of these transformations more openly and critically.

Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* [Wanderer above the sea of fog], 1818. Oil on canvas, 98.4 × 74.8 cm. Held by Kunsthalle Hamburg.

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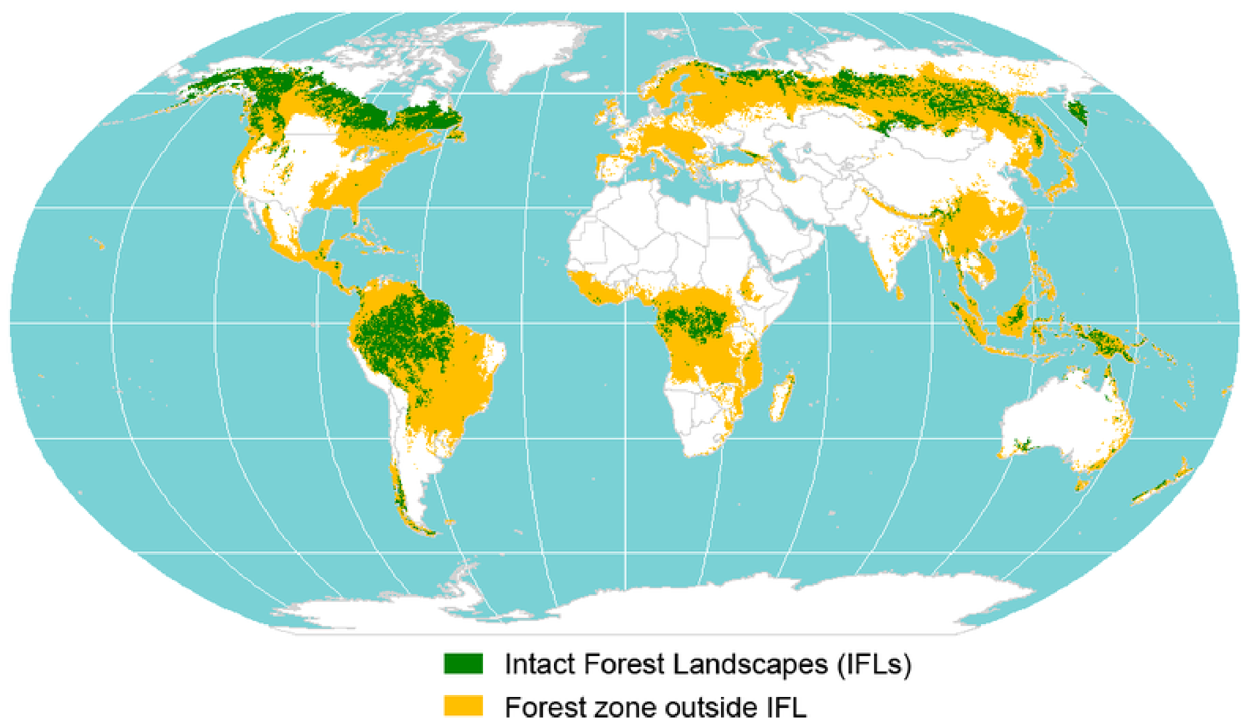
2. Mountains, glaciers, and climate: Mountains and glacial environments are the stuff of many German-language literary descriptions. It is the Italian humanist Francesco Petrarch, however, who inaugurated the genre of the literary mountain ascent. The German-Swiss author Albrecht Haller then wrote the first German-language poem that dealt explicitly with Alpine nature.

Whereas the German Romantic poets still highlighted mountainous nature as deeply ambiguous, where nature is a place of danger and a place of great attraction at the same time, Goethe's Faust tried to understand mountainous nature in its materiality through scientific studies.

Later, in the middle of the nineteenth century the Austrian realist author Adalbert Stifter became the first German-language literary writer (and painter) to give nature a greater voice in his fiction. Modernism builds on this breakthrough and focuses on the more often destructive results of human-nature entanglements, ultimately drawing connections to topics such as global warming and climate change.



Map of the world's intact forest landscapes. Graphic by Peter Potapov.

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3. Forests and deforestation: These topics are particularly prominent in Austrian literature. Adalbert Stifter's fictional characters, even though they are still familiar with the old stories about the forest as refuge from civilization, also learn about its precariousness.

The modern Austrian writer Marlen Haushofer locks her female protagonist behind a mysterious wall where she has to learn how to live sustainably with her animals in nature. Nobel laureate Elfriede Jelinek's Austrian woods, by contrast, are all but suffering from human intervention: tourists and loggers alike claim the Austrian countryside for their needs.

A fast food container in the forest. Photograph by Netzschrauber.

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4. Pollution and waste: Wilhelm Raabe was the first German-language author to call attention to pollution in a late-nineteenth-century novel about the plights of a miller who successfully fights against a mighty sugar factory that is dumping industrial waste into the local stream. Even though a court orders the factory to compensate the miller for his losses, the miller is still disheartened and gives up his business. In the end, the idyllic mill gives way to a modern dry-cleaning plant.

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The topic of waste and pollution receives a much more prominent role in twentieth-century literature. In the 1970s, German filmmaker, actor, and director Rainer Werner Fassbinder wrote a controversial play about runaway urban developments in Frankfurt that create human waste, and East German poet and playwright Heiner Müller crafts a poetic vision of a lake near East Berlin that is ridden with human as well as industrial waste. Finally, Christa Wolf addresses the subject of nuclear pollution in her novel about the 1986 Chernobyl accident.

Via a small selection of literary examples, many of them taken from fiction reflecting the curator's preferences, this virtual exhibition hopes to spark a conversation and engender further reflection on these and other topics that relate to human-nature entanglements. While I focus on narrative, drama, and the philosophical tradition, other scholars should explore the rich corpus of contemporary poetry that addresses human-nature entanglements openly and critically. A starting point might be *Lyrik im Anthropozän* , the collection of poetry (available only in the original German) put together by the curators and research affiliates of the "Welcome to the Anthropocene: The Earth in Our Hands " exhibition at the Deutsches Museum in Munich.

I invite visitors to this exhibition to join me on a curated walk through a small sample of the rich German literary and cultural history of the last two centuries. No specialized knowledge is required. I also invite visitors to reflect on what they are reading. Literature, it turns out, not only mirrors the important discussions of the day; it also shapes our opinion about social and political topics and offers critical perspectives on them.

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Sabine Wilke

Sabine Wilke is professor of German at the University of Washington. She is also associated with and teaches in the European Studies Program. Her research and teaching interests include modern German literature and culture, intellectual history and theory, and cultural and visual studies. She has written books and articles on body constructions in modern German literature and culture, German unification, the history of German film and theater, contemporary German authors and filmmakers, and German colonialism.

With assistance from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Wilke is directing a transatlantic research network on the environmental humanities. She recently edited, with Japhet Johnstone, a collection of essays on *Readings in the Anthropocene: The Environmental Humanities, German Studies and Beyond* (Bloomsbury Press 2017. In 2013 she was a Carson Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich and has recently published *Narrating and Depicting Nature: German Culture and the Environmental Imagination* (Brill 2015. Her scholarly work on German literature and culture in the context of the environmental humanities revolves around the themes of pollution, tourism, waste, visions of nature before humans, and the concept of the Anthropocene.

Websites linked in this text:

- http://www.deutsches-museum.de/ausstellungen/sonderausstellungen/rueckblick/2015/anthropozaen/
- http://www.environmentandsociety.org/exhibitions/welcome-anthropocene
- http://www.deutsches-museum.de/ausstellungen/sonderausstellungen/rueckblick/2015/anthropozaen/lyrik-im-anthropozaen/
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Transformation of Landscapes

Silver and Gold Mines in Latin America
The Romantic Mine
Faustian Large-scale Projects
Settlements, Railway Tracks, Road Networks
The Completely Destroyed Landscape of Today
Related Links

Humans have altered landscapes from the beginnings of civilization, either through agricultural practices, deforestation, dam building, or through roads, mines, tunnels, settlements, and other practices that all result in the transformation of nature and the environment. With the imperial expansion of Europe into the New World and other continents, these transformations became global in scope. This, in turn, led to more trade, greater transportation systems, and enabled unprecedented population growth, industrial agriculture, rapid technological advancements, and the systematic extraction of resources. This human impact on nature intensified radically during the Industrial Revolution and, more recently, in the Great Acceleration of the 1950s that led to the proliferation of nuclear technology and globalized trade.

Gottfried Keller, *Landschaft mit Gewitterstimmung* [Landscape with approaching thunderstorm], 1842. Watercolor, 35 x 47 cm. Held by Zentralbibliothek Zürich.

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These developments have caused scientists such as Paul Crutzen, Eugene Stoermer, Will Steffen, Jan Zalasiewicz, Reinhold Leinfelder, and others to call our age by a new name, the "Anthropocene"—a name for an era in which human beings have become a geological force capable of changing entire Earth systems. The scientists posit that these developments accelerated greatly after the end of World War II, a thesis that they visualize in scientific images such as the famous hockey-stick graph .

The medium of literature takes up a position on these developments, and registers them both thematically and structurally within the text. It presents the environmental transformations in a positive, neutral, or negative light through the perspective of the fictional characters, poetic narrators, and dramatic figures that engage with them, either approvingly or critically. Through literature, readers can participate in these negotiations and share the fate of the fictional characters that are exposed to these transformations of landscapes or, in some cases, are actively engaged in advancing them.

Literature has an impact on its readers through the points of view of the characters that act in it, and who influence the readers' reception of the story. We think a long time about a story that has gripped us. Literary characters can become best friends or antagonists—when characters have certain experiences, they also have an effect on us as readers. Literary characters can inspire us to further reflection, and on occasion they can even turn us into activists and critics.

Even though the Egyptians already built mines, the history of mining enters into a new phase around 1800, when new technologies based on new scientific knowledge were introduced. In Germany, the founding of the Mining Academy in Freiberg (Bergakademie Freiberg in 1765 is evidence of the much more systematic study of mining and the techniques for extraction and processing of minerals. Several of the German Romantic poets developed their appreciation of the value of minerals there. The academy still operates today and is the oldest and most important educational institution in the world explicitly devoted to the study of mining.

No wonder that mines played a major role in Romantic poetry. One of the Academy's most famous graduates was Alexander von Humboldt, who became a mining engineer in Saxony before engaging on his world-famous trip through Latin America (1799–1804. During that trip he had many opportunities to observe conditions in the local mines and offer criticism in the many lectures he gave and works he published after his return.

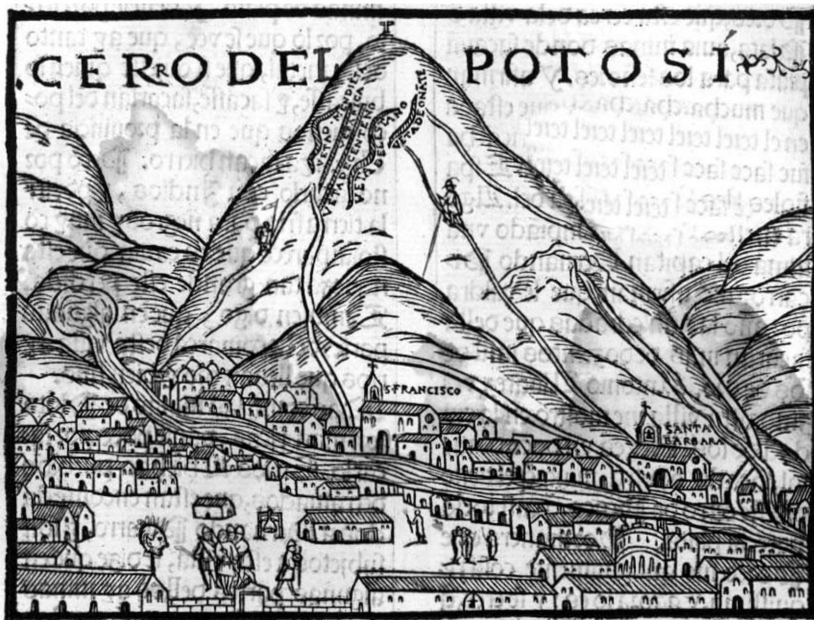
In Europe, it was the mines of Falun in Sweden that were on everyone's mind at the time, and which became the setting in one of E. T. A. Hoffmann's tales. Hoffmann develops an ambiguous perspective toward the mine in his story by portraying it through the enthusiastic eyes of an old miner: at the same time, he counsels caution through the perspective of the main character, who eventually loses his life in the mine. Goethe's Faust, on the other hand, overcomes this Romantic ambiguity by focusing on modern technological solutions to environmental problems—an attitude, however, for which he is punished at the end of the play.

The movement of literary realism in the second half of the nineteenth century is represented in this exhibit by passages from the Swiss-German writer and painter Gottfried Keller. In his last story, Keller focuses on another type of landscape transformation, in this case the phenomenon of building sprawling settlements and road systems that transform entire green subalpine meadows into ugly construction sites and open up the entire countryside to travelers through an extensive system of rail tracks, roads, and ever-expanding railway stations.

Modern and contemporary authors highlight the precariousness of landscape transformations even more directly and critically. This can be illustrated, among many examples, by the texts of W. G. Sebald, the German writer turned literary critic and professor of European literature at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, who walks through England and parts of continental Europe encountering nothing but altered and destroyed nature (some by naturally occurring erosion, some by human activity). Sebald's narrator suffers greatly and emotionally from these encounters.

These literary texts register transformations of landscape on the level of the character and their perspectives on their experiences. Over the stretch of more than two hundred years, an attitude of Romantic enthusiasm about the sites of extraction gradually gives way to open criticism, often resulting in a melancholy attitude on the part of the characters who, wherever they turn, encounter nothing but sites of alteration and, ultimately, destruction.

Silver and Gold Mines in Latin America



Sixteenth-century illustration of the Bolivian city Potosí, from *Crónica del Perú*. Pedro Cieza de León, 1553.

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The vast transformation of landscape through human activity found one of its first and most prolific German commentators in the mining engineer Alexander von Humboldt. In his personal narrative about his trip to Latin America (1799–1804), Humboldt responded to what he saw and experienced there, first with approval, but increasingly with concern. In his travelogue from 1815 he voices his criticism of the working situations in the mines and the Spaniard's never ending lust for gold:

> One of the governors who recently arrived in these coastal areas had to praise the mines in order to live up to the court's expectations. And in order to cover up the lowly and ugly character of the greed for gold at least to some extent he justified it with the use that they wanted to put these rich resources to that were collected through trickery and violence.
>
> —Alexander von Humboldt, *Die Forschungsreise in den Tropen Amerikas* (1815), ed. Hanno Beck (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2008), 2:436.

Even Christopher Columbus's letter to King Ferdinand, in which Columbus praises the value of gold as a resource that soon will be available for the Spanish king's glory, gives grounds for criticism. Humboldt calls the letter a document that is rooted in its time, but comments that it pains him to hear "*such a pompous praise of the riches from a person whose entire life revealed only the most noble selflessness*" (p. 437).

These passages show a growing critical awareness among progressively leaning European intellectuals at the beginning of the nineteenth century that the imperial era of European influence on the rest of the world was and continues to be based on the systematic and unsustainable extraction of natural resources from these new worlds for the benefit of growing European empires.

The Romantic Mine

Nineteenth-century portrait of the German Romantic author E. T. A. Hoffmann. Artist and year unknown. Oil on wood, 41 x 35 cm. Held by Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin.

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In a tale from 1819, the German Romantic author E. T. A. Hoffmann focuses on one of the largest mines in Europe in the Swedish town of Falun. In this story he emphasizes the tragedy of deadly mining accidents.

The seaman Elis Fröböm, facing the mouth of the mine of Falun for the first time during his visit there, reacts with horror, an emotion that he has to overcome in the later part of the story if he wants to follow his heart and marry the beautiful Ulla, daughter of a mining baron. But shortly before their wedding, Elis is buried alive in the mine and Ulla, ironically, is only able to embrace the fully preserved corpse fifty year later when the body is found again.

To accentuate the tensions, Hoffmann first gives voice to an old miner who talks to Elis about the mythical underground world of minerals with Romantic enthusiasm:

> [H]e described the great main-shaft, with its dark brown sides; he told how incalculably rich the mine was in gems of the finest water. More and more vivid grew his words, more and more glowing his face. He went, in his description, through the different shafts as if they had been the alleys of some enchanted garden. The jewels came to life, the fossils began to move; the wondrous pyrosmalite and the almandine flashed in the light of the miner's candles; the rock crystals glittered, and darted their rays.
>
> —E. T. A. Hoffmann, "The Mines of Falun" (1819), in *The Best Tales of Hoffmann*, ed. E. F. Bleiler, trans. Major Alexander Ewing (New York: Dover, 1967), 290.

Almandin on grayish-green slate, found in Austria. Object size: 19 x 11 x 7 cm. Photograph by Didier Descouens.

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Against such Romantic idealization of the world of minerals, Hoffmann features Elis Fröböm's description of his reaction to the mouth of the mine:

> Its dark brown sides go, at first for the most part, perpendicularly down, till about halfway they are sloped inwards towards the center by enormous accumulations of stones and refuse. In these, and on the sides, there peeped out here and there timberings of old shafts, formed of strong shores set close together and strongly rabbeted at the ends, in the way that log houses are built. Not a tree, not a blade of grass to be seen in all the bare, blank, crumbling congeries of stony chasms; the pointed, jagged, indented masses of rock tower aloft all round in wonderful forms, often like monstrous animals turned to stone, often like colossal human beings. In the abyss itself lie in wild confusion-pell-mell-stones, slag, and scoria, and an eternal, stupefying sulphurous vapour rises from the depths, as if the hell-broth, whose reek poisons and kills all the green gladsomeness of nature, were being brewed down below
>
> —Hoffmann, "The Mines of Falun," 293–4.

By putting these two attitudes towards the practice of mining side by side in his story, Hoffmann encourages his readers to reflect on the extent of the transformation of landscape through mining and the use of minerals in everyday life.

Faustian Bargain: Large-Scale Projects

Large-scale projects need expansive overviews over the landscape, allowing it to be approached from a perspective of power and mastery. Germany's famous poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, models such an attitude of mastery over nature in a crucial scene of *Faust II* where Faust reflects on his concept of montane nature:

> To me the mountain masses are nobly dumb,
> I don't ask why they are, or where they're from.
> When Nature in herself was grounded
> The ball of Earth she neatly rounded,
> Delighting in the mountains and the deep,
>
> Setting rock on rock, and peak on peak,
> Sloping the hills conveniently downward,
> Softening them to vales, gently bounded.
>
> —Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust* (1833), trans. A. S. Kline, in the online resource *Poetry in Translation* (2003), lines 10095–102 .

Drawing of the marble quarry near Hof. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1810.

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The violence with which Faust wishes to displace the old couple, Philemon and Baucis, in act 5 in order to realize his vision of world conquest derives from a deep-seated tendency in Western culture to master nature. Goethe gives this tendency a hyperbolic form and urges us to reflect on it critically:

> The old ones up there should yield,
>
> I want the limes as my retreat,
> The least tree in another's field,
> Detracts from my whole estate.
> There, to stand and look around,
> I'll build a frame from bough to bough,
>
> My gaze revealing, under the sun,
> A view of everything I've done,
> Overseeing, as the eye falls on it,
> A masterpiece of the human spirit,
> Forging with intelligence,
>
> A wider human residence.
>
> —Goethe, *Faust,* lines 11240–50 .

Settlements, Railway Tracks, Road Networks

In Swiss-German realist author Gottfried Keller's last novel, *Martin Salander* (1886), the title figure hardly recognizes his hometown when he returns to Switzerland after spending several years in Brazil.

A small provincial railway station in Switzerland. Photograph by Bobo11.

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The small-town railway station the narrator recalls from before he left has been replaced in the interim by a much larger one. In fact, the entire county is now subject to a comprehensive system of tracks. What is more, forests and meadows have now been turned into ugly construction sites:

> [Martin Salander] searched fruitlessly however among the never-ceasing additions to the town, looking for traces of the old shady friendly paths which earlier had led upward between gently rolling meadows and gardens. Now these same paths lay buried under dusty or gravel-surfaced roads.
>
> —Gottfried Keller, *Martin Salander* (1886), trans. Kenneth Halwas (London: John Calder, 1963), 5.

Gottfried Keller, *Landschaft mit Gewitterstimmung* [Landscape with approaching thunderstorm], 1842. Watercolor, 35 x 47 cm. Held by Zentralbibliothek Zürich.

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It turns out that the many beautiful trees that stood in front of or next to Martin Salander's home and the neighbor's property had to be cut down in order to make room for more buildings in the wake of the community's enthusiastic embrace of expansion and building developments. Upon inquiring about the many fine trees that used to stand around his neighbor's house, his wife tells him:

> Someone had taken the land away from him, or rather forced him to make building sites of it since several other landowners had had an unnecessary street laid. There it is, every shady green has disappeared and the ground changed into a sand and gravel surface. But no one comes to buy the lots! And since the trees are gone so is my business
>
> —Keller, *Martin Salander*, 37.

Keller's views about these transformations are not neutral. He lets his character comment critically on this building frenzy. Readers are also able to experience Salander's shock and disapproval of these developments. At the same time, they are invited to reflect on Salander's own involvement and implication in these modernization processes:

Nineteenth-century map of Zürich. Drawing by Heinrich Weiss-Keiser, c. 1865.

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After leaving the station Salander took a lengthy walk through sections of the city which were just springing up or had recently been finished, and he amused himself by observing the houses in which he had money invested. But since he did not walk around town frequently he was no longer able to identify them. On that his thoughts turned to the alarming increase of building fever which, indeed, he himself had promoted and also the rumors which already were being circulated concerning the unavoidable building "bust."

—Keller, *Martin Salander*, 187.

The Dufour map of 1846–65 documents the transformations of landscapes as a result of modern settlements and transportation networks that were recorded for the vicinity of Zurich. This image of Zurich and surroundings shows the extent of human settlements in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The Completely Destroyed Landscape of Today

The densely built-up landscapes of today, with all their transportation networks, road- and trail-systems, create a topography that is characterized by pollution and waste from human activity: something that comes into full view in contemporary literature.

W. G. Sebald, who lived and worked in England since 1966, described densely built-up landscapes in his novel *The Rings of Saturn* (1992), which was inspired by a region in the Netherlands that he was able to observe from above while flying back to England from his hiking trip through northern Europe.

> The small propeller plane that services the route from Amsterdam to Norwich first climbed towards the sun before turning west. Spread out beneath us lay one of the most densely-populated regions in Europe, with endless terraces, sprawling satellite towns, business parks and shining glass houses which looked like large quadrangular ice floes drifting across this corner of the continent where not a patch is left to its own devices. Over the centuries the land had been regulated, cultivated and built on until the whole region was transformed into a geometric pattern.
>
> —W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: The Havill Press, 1998), 90.

Sebald's narrator hikes through a completely desolate piece of Earth altered by human activity, and experiences this transformation physically and mentally as a form of destruction. This leads to a state of melancholy.

When he later walks through Suffolk, specifically the Heath of Dunwich, which has fallen prey to coastal erosion (a phenomenon not caused by human activity), he is nevertheless equally

> overcome by a feeling of panic. The low, leaden sky; the sickly violet hue of the heath clouding the eye; the silence, which rushed in the ears like the sound of the sea in a shell; the flies buzzing about me—all this became oppressive and unnerving
>
> —Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 172.

Sebald's character articulates this panic and feeling of melancholy by using a writing style that molds the reader's perception of the reality of the scene. He makes very detailed and careful descriptions of the destroyed landscape that he is walking through, with the effect that it becomes almost irrelevant whether or not this destruction was caused naturally or through human activity.

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Mountains, Glaciers, and Climate

Narrating Mountain Ascents
Alpine Nature
Romantic Mountains
Narrating Geology and Weather
Mountains as Narrators
Glaciers and Climate Engineering
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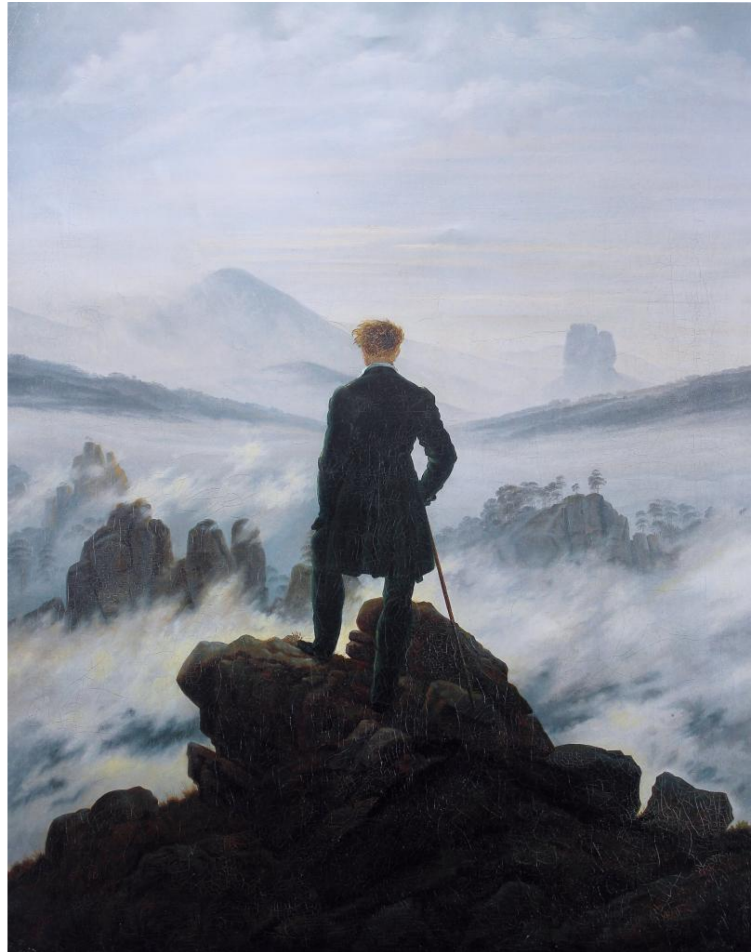

Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* [Wanderer above the sea of fog], 1818. Oil on canvas, 98.4 × 74.8 cm. Held by Kunsthalle Hamburg.

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The topic of mountain nature conveys the relationship between nature scenes and their representation in literature and art. The relationship is a complex one. Alpine nature is conquered through literary descriptions of it. And Alpine literature, at the same time, prepares readers for further explorations, deepening humanity's entanglements with nature. As a literary topic, Alpine nature is viewed through the lens of ambiguity, danger, and its eventual conquest and mastery.

For centuries, the Alps were thought to be impassable and inhospitable. Apart from the occasional individual dwelling in a remote location—refuges used by goat herders on a seasonal basis—most people lived in Alpine valleys, in close proximity to a system of trails, or to a lake or river that facilitated contact with other human settlements and networks of trade and transport.

An early form of Alpine tourism was the "Grand Tour" through the capitals of continental Europe. Starting in the seventeenth century, many sons of British and European elites embarked on such a trip to visit the cradles of Western civilization and classical antiquity. Mass tourism in the modern sense of the word dates back to the nineteenth century, when a system of rail tracks facilitated access to Alpine nature sites. The Semmering outside Vienna is the oldest railway that cuts through the mountains, and is now a UNESCO world heritage site.

It was the Italian humanist Francesco Petrarch, however, who wrote the first description of a mountain ascent. In his narrative he mainly focused on his experience once he arrived at the summit and was able to enjoy majestic views over the lowlands. The description of Petrarch's climb became the model for later mountaineering descriptions. With his narrative, Petrarch laid the foundation for the conventions that continue to guide literary representations of mountain ascents.

After hiking through Alpine nature with his friend Salomon Geßner, Swiss-German writer Albrecht von Haller composed the first German-language poem that deals specifically with the Alps. Geßner is known for his pastoral prose and Haller's Alpine poem makes ample reference to that literary tradition.

In his novella about a mysterious rune mountain, romantic poet Ludwig Tieck frames mountain nature as an allegory for a place where dangers lurk but also great attractions abound. Readers of the tale are able to experience the romantic ambivalence toward the high mountains, looking over the shoulders of the characters and observing their struggle to decode the book of nature in a never-ending search for deeper meaning.

Goethe's dramatic character Faust, on the other hand, is a materialist. He seeks to understand mountain nature in its material essence and conducts a plethora of scientific experiments focusing on geology, weather, and atmosphere. Goethe himself was known for his interest in science and mountaineering. His scientific studies and literary pursuits complemented each other.

The Austrian writer and painter Adalbert Stifter elevates the relationship between geology and literature to a poetic principle. In his fictional work, nature becomes an antagonist to the human protagonists. Stifter's characters are trained field researchers. They translate their scientific findings into narrative descriptions of nature that include first inklings of a number of adverse consequences of the human entanglement with nature.

Modern writers are less hesitant about addressing the devastating consequences of human-nature entanglements more openly and directly. In his science fiction novel, Berlin author Alfred Döblin addresses the problems with large-scale Faustian climate engineering schemes. Civilization is afforded a narrative voice that is rather critical of these schemes, and emphasizes their strangeness and destructive nature.

The contemporary author Ilija Trojanow published one of the first German-language climate change novels, *EisTau* (2011, in English, *The Lamentations of Zeno*, about a former glaciologist who has become a lecturer on a cruise ship in Antarctica. The protagonist suffers both physically and emotionally from the death of the Alpine glacier that he had studied for many decades. Even though the glaciologist is implicated in climate change by his work for the cruise ship industry, the readers are nevertheless able to feel and experience his pain at the glacier's death, and they suffer along with him.

These literary portrayals of mountain nature, mountain ascents, geological exploration, melting glaciers, and polar environments not only mirror the scientific knowledge of the time but actively shape the narratives that we tell each other about this nature.

Narrating Mountain Ascents

View from the summit of Mont Ventoux. Photograph by Mimova.

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The Italian humanist Francesco Petrarch inaugurated the genre of mountain ascent narrations with his letter of 26 April 1336, written in Latin and addressed to his friend, the humanist Dionigi di Borgo, on the occasion of having successfully climbed Mount Ventoux in the French Provence. About this project he has the following to say:

> I conceived the plan of some time doing what I have at last accomplished to-day. The Idea took hold upon me with especial force when, in re-reading Livy's History of Rome, yesterday, I happened upon the place where Philip of Macedon, the same who waged war against the Romans, ascended Mount Haemus in Thessaly, from whose summit he was able, it is said, to see two seas, the Adriatic and the Euxine.
>
> —Francesco Petrarch, in James Harvey Robinson, ed. and trans., *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1898), 308.

View from Mount Haemus (Haemus mons), Bulgaria. Photograph by Deyan Vasilev (Dido3).

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In contrast to people in the Middle Ages, Petrarch no longer considered the world a place that is merely a miserable station on humanity's path toward heaven, but as a place that has its own validity and laws. This new and more secular attitude towards the world became the foundation of a new and radically different human attitude towards nature, particularly towards landscapes in which aesthetic and philosophical perspectives play an important role.

> At first, owing to the unaccustomed quality of the air and the effect of the great sweep of view spread out before me, I stood like one dazed. I beheld the clouds under our feet, and what I had read of Athos and Olympus seemed less incredible as I myself witnessed the same things from a mountain of less fame.
>
> —Petrarch in Robinson, *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*, 313–14.

This early document is evidence for the fact that in the Renaissance a very different, secular, and more modern knowledge about mountain nature was emerging, one that presented mountains as climbable and conquerable. The view from the top is a very powerful tool for mastery and conquest. Landscapes can be surveyed for miles on end and, with that knowledge, they can be owned.

Alpine Nature

Harvard University, Houghton Library, pga_typ_765_73_447_frontis

Frontispiece to Albrecht von Haller's *Ode sur les Alpes*, 1773. Illustration by David Herrliberger.

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Courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard University

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The Swiss-German poet Albrecht von Haller was the first literary author to represent the beauty of the Alps, in his 1729 poem of the same name. He composed the poem after a visit to the Alps, during which he explored their valleys and peaks with his Swiss-German friend Salomon Geßner. This long poem consists of forty-nine stanzas of ten lines, written in Alexandrine verse. His intent, it seems, was to convince an educated public of the beauty of Alpine nature. In this poem, Alpine nature—even though it is still perceived as threatening to a certain extent—is described as something that humans can conquer.

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> Though Nature spread with stones the barren land,
> The plough yet tames your soil, and harvests grow;
> And mighty mountains, rais'd at her command,
> Protect you still from man, man's fiercest foe.
> ...
>
> —Albrecht von Haller, "Die Alpen," (1732), in *Poems of Various Kinds*, trans. Edward Hamley (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1795), online at Spenser and the Tradition.

This attitude of increasing mastery over—and conquest of—Alpine nature is transmitted via literature. In fact, literature facilitates and builds on this. The conquest of nature and the literary and artistic representations of this conquest are two sides of the same coin.

In this poem, a literary discourse emerges that represents Alpine nature as habitable, embodying a rugged form of sublime beauty. This is especially evident in the parts that deal with the poetic rendition of Alpine heights, glaciers, and streams:

> Milk is your food, pure rills your wholesome draught,
> More sweet than fev'rish wine, that glows in gold;
> With crackling ice alone your hills are fraught,
> Mines, which Peru with envy might behold!
> Where Freedom reigns, ev'n labour is repose,
> Bare rocks are strewn with flow'rs, and soft the north-wind blows.
>
> —Haller, "Die Alpen."

The Alpine nature described in this poem has attracted many visitors, who have marveled at the picturesque high peaks, rugged glacial valleys, pristine mountain streams, and gushing waterfalls. Today, though, the subject of glacial melt, attributed to climate change, has become a regular part of tourist experiences of glacial environments, as well as characterizing many contemporary descriptions of Alpine nature.

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Romantic Mountains

Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* [Wanderer above the sea of fog], 1818. Oil on canvas, 98.4 × 74.8 cm. Held by Kunsthalle Hamburg.

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Among the many romantic literary texts that include mountains, one by the German romantic poet Ludwig Tieck sums up the romantic attitude towards mountain nature: his novella about the mysterious "rune mountain" ("Der Runenberg," 1804). This novella brings together romantic attitudes toward mountains with the mythical character of Venus, who is said to reside in one of them. At the beginning of the novella, the young hunter Christian meets a mysterious stranger who tells him about the "rune mountain." The conversation produces a longing in Christian and he decides to search for this mountain.

> He came into places he had never seen before; the rocks grew steeper; the green disappeared; the bald cliffs called to him, as with angry voices, and a low moaning wind drove him on before it. Thus he hurried forward without pause; and late after midnight he came upon a narrow footpath, which ran along by the brink of an abyss.
>
> —Ludwig Tieck, "Der Runenberg" (1804). Translation by Thomas Carlyle, online via Wikisource.

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Thomas Jones, *The Bard*, 1774. Oil on canvas. Held by the National Museum Cardiff.

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He heeded not the depth which yawned beneath, and threatened to swallow him forever; so keenly was he driven along by wild imaginations and vague wishes. At last his perilous track led him close by a high wall, which seemed to lose itself in the clouds; the path grew narrower every step; and Christian had to cling by projecting stones to keep himself from rushing down into the gulf.

—Tieck, "Der Runenberg."

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As we can see from this passage, the romantic literary figures still hope to decipher the book of nature, but during the course of the story it turns out that the most inaccessible parts of the natural world contain a form of danger that no one, certainly not young Christian, is able to resist.

It is these inaccessible areas of the mountains—their hidden caves and interior spaces—where unforeseen dangers lurk.

Henry Fuseli, *Nachtmahr* [The nightmare], 1781. Oil on canvas, 101.6 x 127 cm. Held by Detroit Institute of Arts.

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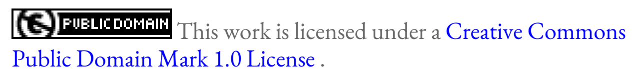
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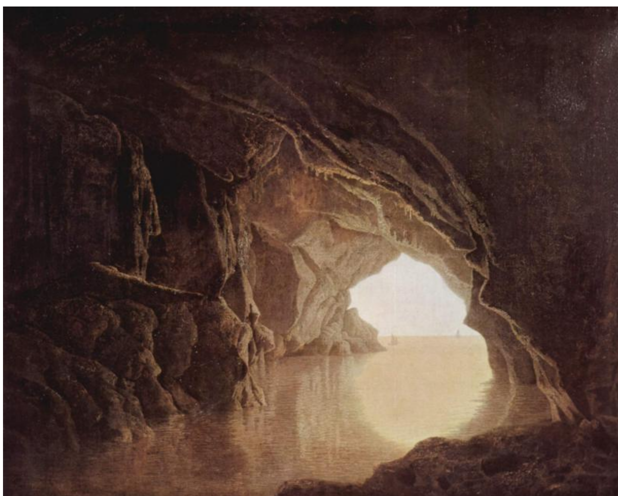
It is interesting to see how these caves and their perceived dangers are coded female. For the male characters that populate romantic tales, they contain both hidden pleasures and latent dangers at the same time. The romantic period makes this ambivalent attitude toward mountain nature one of its central concerns. Christian's return to the rune mountain at the end of the novella, regarded from this perspective, constitutes a logical homecoming to a romantic nature—one that has subsequently been the subject of many artworks and musical settings.



Joseph Wright of Derby, *Cave at Evening*, 1774. Oil on canvas, 101.5 x 127 cm. Held by Smith College Museum of Arts.
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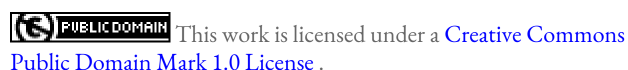
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Narrating Geology and Weather

The Brocken viewed from the "Goetheweg" on a postcard. Accessed via Goethezeitportal on 11 September 2018. Click here to view source.

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Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's literary representation of mountains goes beyond the romantic allegory of the book of nature and displays a renewed interest in the material mountain itself. Goethe was an avid mountaineer himself: in 1777, he ascended northern Germany's highest peak, the Brocken in the Harz region, for the first time. He would make the climb three times altogether during his lifetime. One of the popular routes that lead to the top of the Brocken is named after him—the "Goetheweg."

Goethe is also known for his scientific studies, especially for his descriptions of geological and atmospheric phenomena. In his notes about a possible theory of weather from 1825 he writes:

> We dwell in [the atmosphere] as inhabitants of the sea shore. We gradually ascend to the highest peak where it is difficult to live, but in thought we climb further. We have ventured to think of the moon, the other planets and their moons, and finally the fixed stars, as collaborating in the whole ...
>
> —Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in *Goethe, The Collected Works: Scientific Studies,* ed. and trans. Douglas Miller (New York: Suhrkamp, 1988), 146.

Drawing of a German landscape. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1810.

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His character Faust from the drama of the same name is trying to understand the material essence of mountain nature on many of his climbing trips. His antagonist Mephistopheles, himself, however, not as talented a mountaineer as Faust, is huffing and puffing on these outings into mountainous environments and prefers a more pleasant and level place:

> For myself, I'd deliberately create
> A pleasure house in a pleasant place.
> Woods, hills, fields, meadows, open ground,
> With splendid gardens all around.
>
> —Goethe, *Faust* (1833), trans. A. S. Kline, online via *Poetry in Translation* (2003), lines 10160–3.

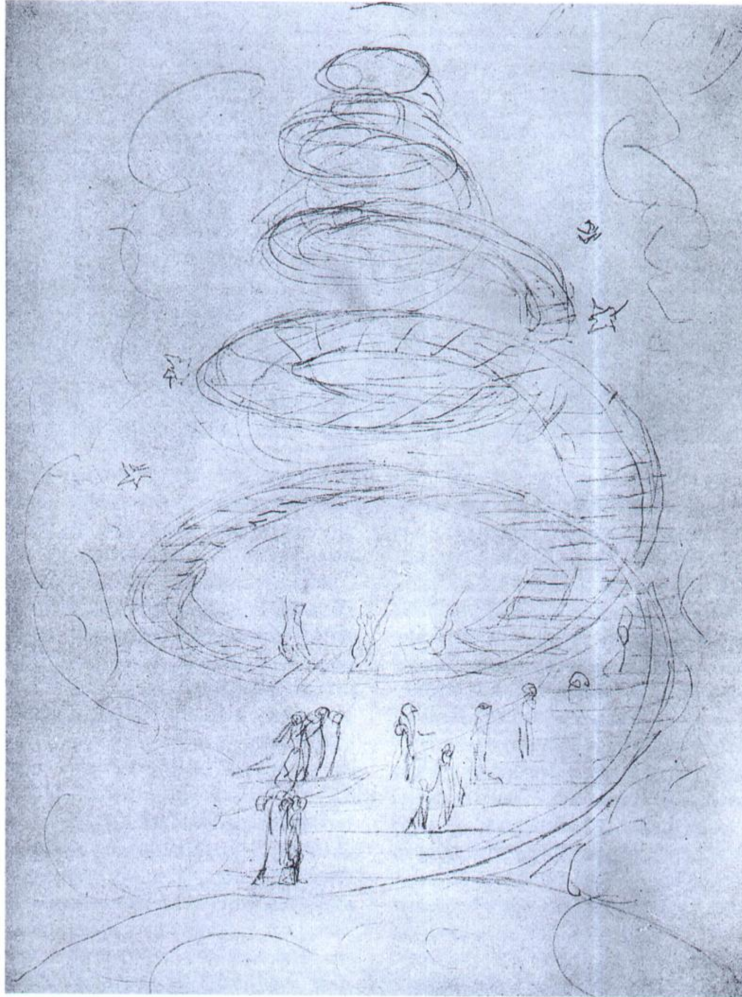

Illustration for Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*. William Blake, unknown year.

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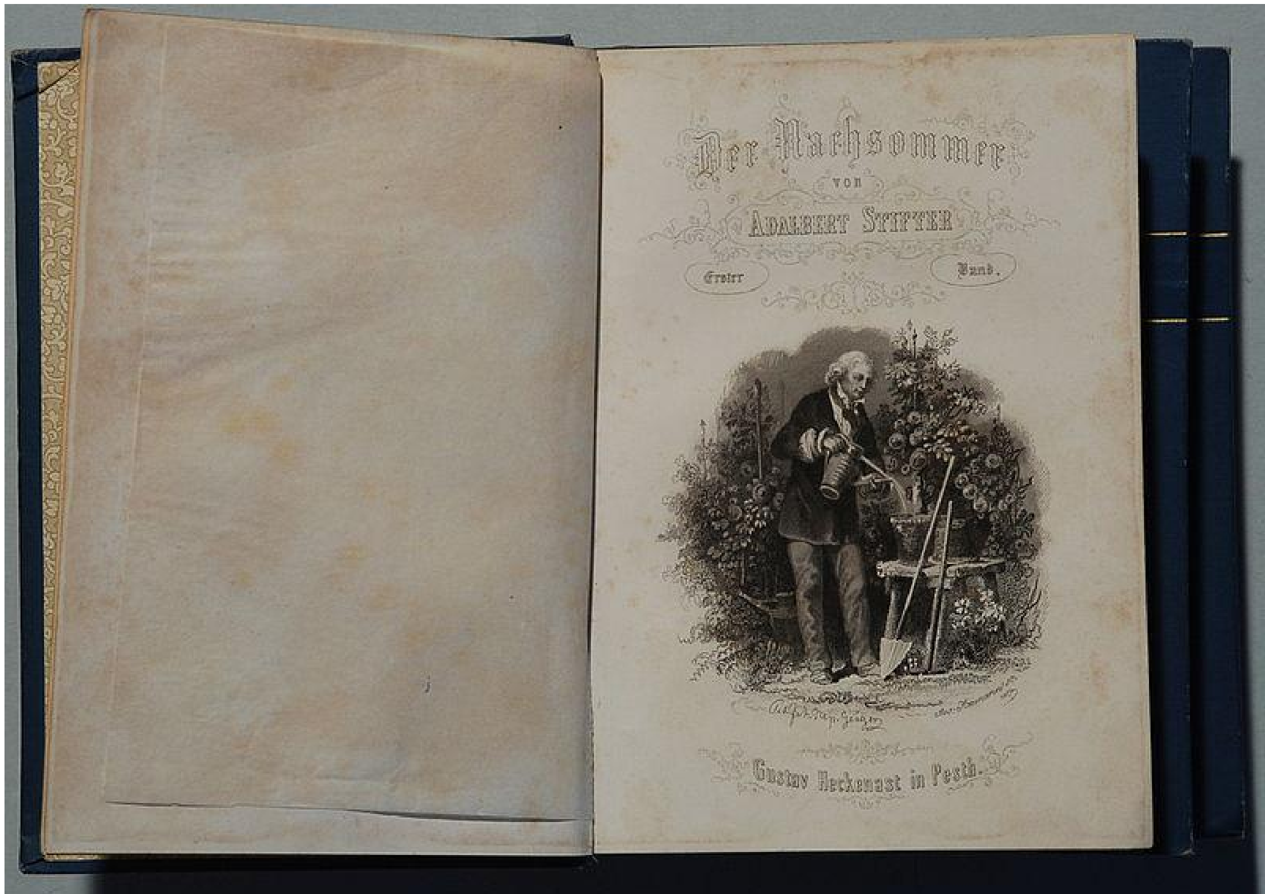
In act 4 of the second part of the tragedy, Faust retreats to a high Alpine peak in order to study and describe geologic and atmospheric phenomena from an elevated perspective. From there he seeks to investigate the light and other atmospheric phenomena that are of particular fascination to him, an episode that prefigures the ending of the play when Faust's soul is rescued from Mephistopheles's grip by the Angels that are able to transport Faust's soul into the heavens, a scene that is depicted in a drawing by William Blake.

Faust derives his knowledge about geological revolutions from a mountainous perspective that gives him access to the gaze of the surveyor—a gaze of mastery and conquest:

> Gazing at those deep solitudes beneath my feet,
> I tread the mountain brink with deliberation,
> Leaving the cloud-vehicle that carried me,
> Softly, through bright day, over land and ocean.
>
> —Goethe, *Faust,* lines 10040–3.

Mountains as Narrators

Several decades after Goethe's *Faust*, Adalbert Stifter, Austria's most prominent literary author in the nineteenth century, returned to the subject of geology and descriptions of mountain nature in his fictional works and paintings.



First edition of *Der Nachsommer* by Josef Axmann (1793–1873, with an illustration by Peter Johann Nepomuk Geiger (1805–1880. Photograph by H.-P. Haack.

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In Stifter's 1857 novel *Der Nachsommer* (*Indian Summer*, mountain nature becomes a geological narrative that explains the history of humankind. The novel's first person narrator and protagonist, Heinrich Drehndorf, describes his scientific studies of mountain peaks and glacial valleys in the following way:

> I worked more industriously and effectively than ever before; we examined cliffs along the stratification of their base in the valleys and at various higher points accessible to us or which could be made accessible with hammers and chisels.
>
> —Stifter, *Indian Summer* (1857. Trans. Wendell Frye, Lang: New York, 1985, 180.)

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Tools of today’s geologist, a chipping hammer and a loupe. Photograph by Hannes Grobe, AWI.

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It is his study of geology and—following his work in the field—the discussions of his findings with his friends and co-workers, that lead Heinrich to his wife Natalie. Stifter developed the theme of geology through discussions with his friend, Friedrich Simony. Simony was one of the first modern geologists to utilize photography as a tool to provide visual evidence for geological data, which later developed into time-lapse photography and other data visualization techniques that are still used in today’s digital age.

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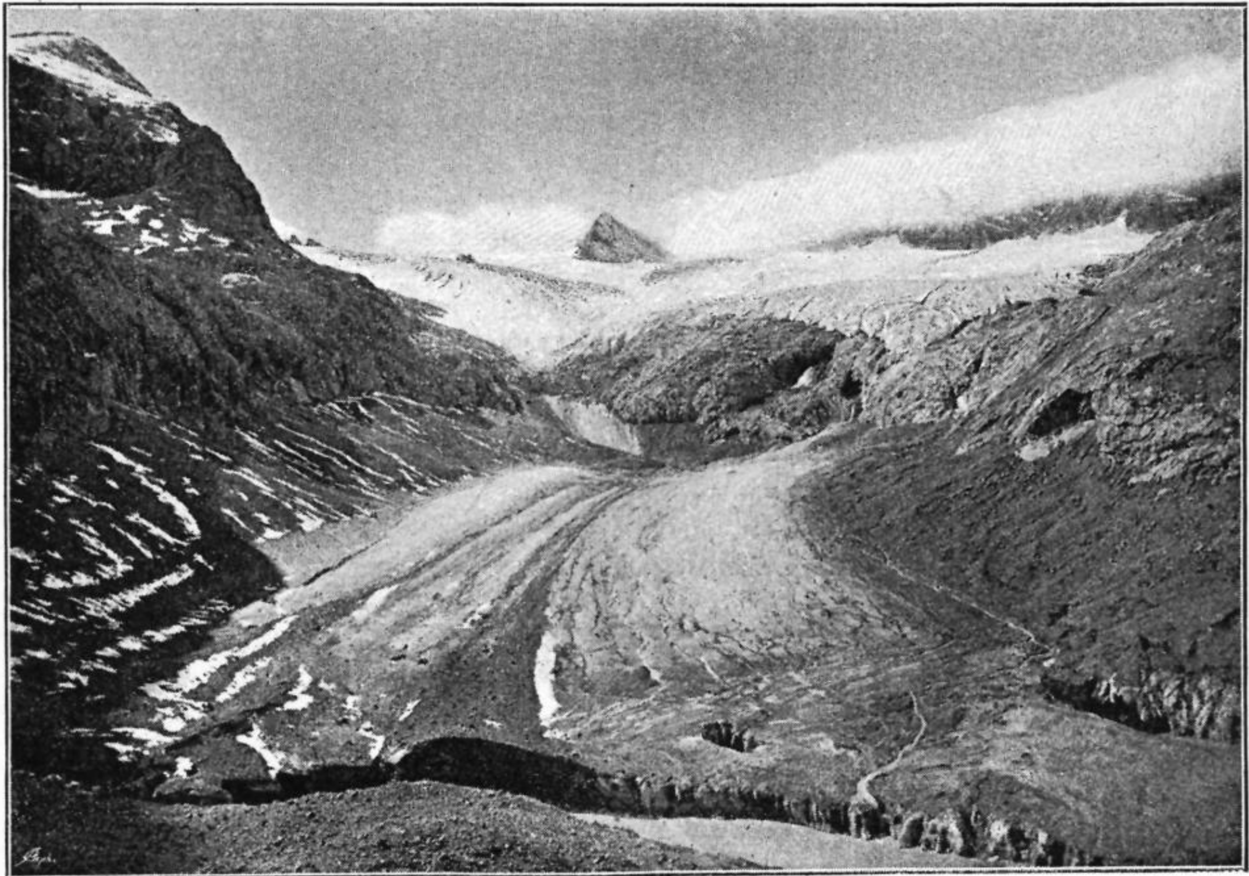

The Karls-Icefield on 27 September 1890. Photograph by Friedrich Simony.

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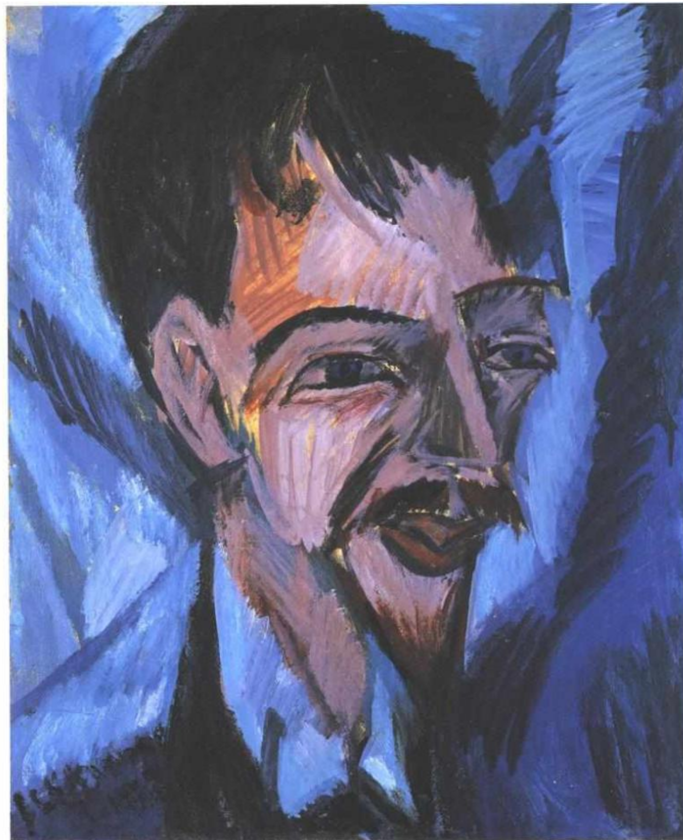
It is on the occasion of an ascent up a mountain during the winter season that Stifter's protagonist Heinrich Drehndorf is able to view the entire valley and the region around the farm where his future wife, Natalie, lives. Only after this experience—the gaze of mastery and conquest—does Heinrich finally decide to ask Natalie to become his wife. It is also at this point in the novel that mountain nature, particularly its glacial features, is given a much greater presence in the narrative and plot:

> Whereas in the past year forests and cliffs had enclosed us and only a few places afforded us an open view, this year we were almost always on the open heights, and only in rare instances were we surrounded by cliffs or forests. Our most frequent companion in our work was the ice.
>
> —Stifter, *Indian Summer,* 310.

Stifter's fictitious characters are only able to make the most important decisions of their lives (in Heinrich's case the decision about whom to marry) when afforded clear views of mountainous peaks and glacial valleys. In other words, nineteenth-century literature emphasizes the materiality of scenes of nature, and gives greater narrative agency to nature. Nineteenth-century literature was able to reconcile itself with anthropogenic interventions into the natural world, although the destructive consequences of these human-nature entanglements were beginning to register, at least in isolated instances. Stifter's texts are evidence that the balance was beginning to shift.

Glaciers and Climate Engineering



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Portrait of the Berlin author Alfred Döblin, 1912. Oil on canvas, 50.8 x 41.3 cm. Held by Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Association Fund.

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A novelist from Berlin, Alfred Döblin, was the first literary author in the early part of the twentieth century to address the subject of climate engineering. This is demonstrated by his epic science fiction novel, *Berge, Meere und Giganten* (Mountains, oceans, and giants, published in 1924.

In the chapters about Iceland, and about the project of de-icing Greenland to harvest its enormous potential energy, the narrator of the novel assumes a planetary perspective, looking down on the future of human civilization. From this perspective, the world has been totally destroyed. All Western continents have been eliminated, a gigantic planetary war has been waged, Iceland's volcanic energy has been harvested and stored on gigantic ships and Greenland has been de-iced. The technology of storing these vast amounts of energy in veils of tourmaline in order to feed the world's hunger for power is applied successfully at first, only to later give rise to

the reawakening of dragon-like monsters from earlier geological periods. As a result of the warming climate, these monsters now threaten all life forms in Europe.

> The experts had in mind letting the unique power of the melting glaciers work for them. They invented ever larger schemes; they did not want to stop with the de-icing of Greenland but envisioned climate change for the entire northern hemisphere.
>
> —Alfred Döblin, *Berge, Meere und Giganten* (1924; repr. Olten: Walter, 1977), 293. Translated by Sabine Wilke.

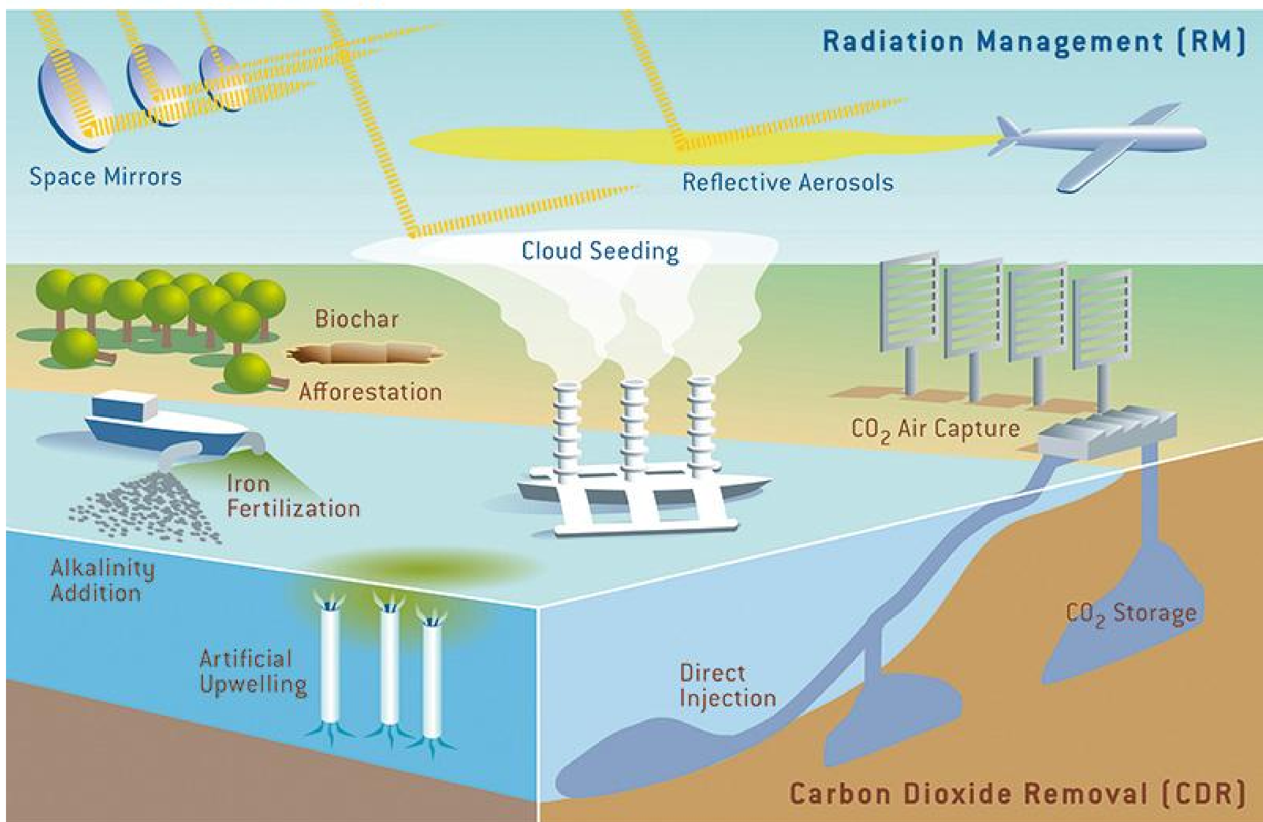

Diagram with various models of climate engineering. Graphic by Rita Erven, Kiel Earth Institute.

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This gigantic and terrifying project is narrated in a way that encourages the reader to assume that civilization, in its entirety, is speaking as one critical and disapproving voice:

> Off the northern coast of Scotland, wild and craggy rock islands were rising from the stormy sea: those were the gathering locations for ships, machines, people. The engineers, mathematicians, physicists, geologists and their assistants were concentrated in London Brussels. They were always wafting new plans over to the people, enticing them, exciting them.
>
> —Döblin, *Berge, Meere und Giganten*, 295. Translated by Sabine Wilke.

A specimen of the silicate mineral tourmaline. USGS, 2004.

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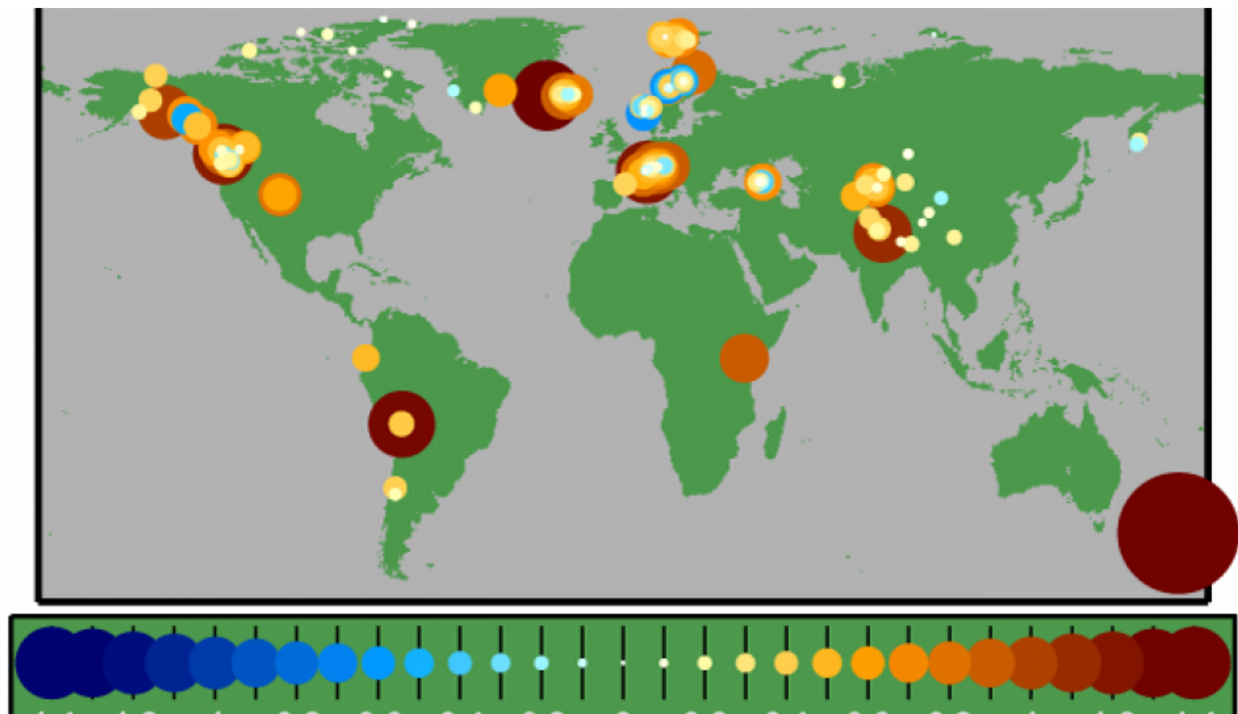
Energy storage becomes a poetic principle. The readers are inundated with literary images: these images no longer function as metaphors or allegories of the book of nature in the romantic sense, nor are they reminiscent of the literary images that populated the texts of the nineteenth century.

The mountains, oceans, and giants of this early twentieth-century science fiction novel become the antagonists working against human civilization. Through these narrative features, non-human nature is given a literary presence and a new voice. This book makes it clear to its readers that the technological progress that made de-icing Greenland possible does not constitute a solution to destructive attitudes toward nature that are the cultural foundation of modern Western civilizations.

Melting Glaciers



Mountain glacier changes since 1970. Graphic created by Rober A. Rohde as part of the Global Warming Art project.

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The contemporary German writer Trojanow was born in Bulgaria, raised in Kenya, and sensitized at an early age to the problems of increasing desertification and global warming. He was university-educated in Germany, and today lives in Vienna. In his climate change novel *The Lamentations of Zeno*, he describes the relationship between humans and nature as one of deep entanglement. The novel explores the relationship between a glaciologist, Zeno Hintermaier, and a melting glacier—the object of his scientific pursuits—in the form of a love story:

> I've been watching it my entire life, with passionate care and precise instruments... .
>
> Whenever I stopped to catch my breath I would touch it, laying my hands on its flanks and then stroking my face, taking in its icy breath, its invigorating cold. I was familiar with every one of its sounds, the creaking and the clanking, every glacier has its own voice ... We were like an elderly couple: one of us was severely ill, and the other couldn't do anything about it.
>
> —Ilija Trojanow, *The Lamentations of Zeno*, trans. Philip Boehm (London: Verso, 2016), 44.

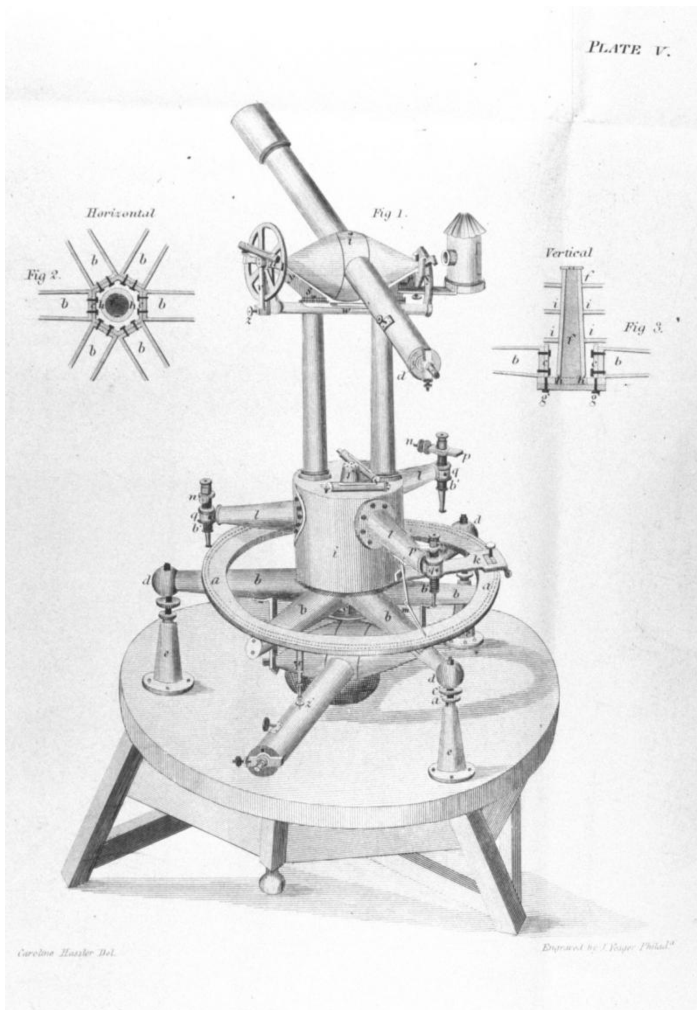

Illustration of a Troughton 24-inch theodolite. Caroline Hassler, 1820.

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Zeno Hintermaier takes his students to the glacier, and on each field trip he stumbles on the problem of shrinkage that "his" glacier is experiencing because of global warming. The situation becomes more and more alarming over time.

> We gazed down into the valley. From above, the effect of human intervention is quite visible, it's easy to see what we have done to nature. That was hardly a revelation, even for the students conditioned by city living who didn't know what an oxbow was. I wanted them to spend at least one afternoon seeing with their own eyes, consciously observing the shrinking fens, the straightened rivers, our civilization's attempts to impose its own discipline on the natural world.
>
> —Trojanow, *The Lamentations of Zeno*, 49.

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The topics of glacial melt, global warming, and climate change are presented to the reader not only thematically, through a story that literally takes place on the melting Antarctic ice fields, but also through a narrative perspective that allows readers to empathize with the main character and feel his sadness when confronted with the topic of climate change. Zeno Hintermaier suffers from this condition physically and emotionally, even though he is, like all those who lead modern lifestyles, dependent on energy and resources. With the help of such a narrative perspective, however, literature like Trojanow's novel can raise awareness of the psychological impacts of climate change on a broad number of people who may not have been persuaded by science to take action, demand stricter regulations, or change their consumption habits.

Related Links

Wikipedia article on Petrarch

Wikipedia article on Albrecht von Haller

Short video on romantic landscape paintings by Dahl and Friedrich, Albertinum Dresden (commentary in German).

Wikipedia article on Thomas Jones

Heights of Reflection, edited by Sean Ireton and Caroline Schaumann, Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2012. With chapters on Haller, Goethe, and many other literary authors and filmmakers. See in particular Sullivan, Heather. "Faust's Mountains: An Ecocritical Reading of Goethe's Tragedy and Science" ; and Sean Ireton, "Geology, Mountaineering, and Self-Formation in Adalbert Stifter's 'Der Nachsommer'"

Ilija Trojanow's website (in German)

Vanishing Ice: Artists on the Frontline of Global Climate Change

Websites linked in this text:

- http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/TextRecord.php?textsid=37801
- https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Runenberg
- https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/FaustIIActIV.php#Act_IV_Scene_I
- https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/FaustIIActIV.php#Act_IV_Scene_I
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrarch
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albrecht_von_Haller

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZiMBdfaTNo
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Jones_(artist)
- https://books.google.de/books?id=h7HJNbI3bDEC&lpg=PA11&dq=Heather%20Sullivan%2C%20Faust&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=true
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- https://books.google.de/books?id=h7HJNbI3bDEC&lpg=PA11&dq=Heather%20Sullivan%2C%20Faust&pg=PA193#v=onepage&q&f=true
- http://trojanow.de/
- http://www.vanishing-ice.org/

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Forests and Deforestation

The Forest as Border
Endangered Virgin Forests
The Forest Beyond Humanity
Sustainable Living in the Forest
Forests as Discourse
Related Links

Literary engagement with forests and deforestation is particularly central in Austrian literature.

The German forester Hans Carl von Carlowitz, in his 1713 *Silvicultura oeconomica*, was the first to discuss forests as resources for wood in the context of sustainability. Carlowitz conceived of a sustainable practice for harvesting forests so that future generations would not be adversely impacted, and so that they would have access to the same resources as the current generation.

Forests later became important subjects in German romantic poetry: not from a perspective that viewed them as a resource, but as locations for mythical concepts about nature, and the role of humans in nature, to be explored. Romantic youths wander through these mythical forests singing romantic songs; others ride on horses or in postal carriages on the newly built and extended road system; others again make their living in the forest and use it as a buffer zone that allows them to practice their eccentric lifestyles.

Authors of romantic fairytales can therefore draw on a rich narrative tradition of forests, which is prevalent in the European fairytale tradition. The Brothers Grimm's collection of fairy tales is but one source in which the woods are full of potential dangers (witches, outlaws, and wild animals make their homes in them but also in which characters can find refuge and shelter from vicious parents and stepparents.

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Drawing of a hunting cabin in the journal *Gartenlaube*. Joseph Schmittzberger, *Jagdhütte im Hochgebirge*, 1888.

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In contemporary literature, Austrian writers have focused intensely on narrating forests and have recently even begun to include the topic of deforestation in their work. The forest is thus often framed in the context of its own disappearance.

A prominent Austrian prose writer and painter of the nineteenth century, Adalbert Stifter, created literary figures that knew the old stories about the woods as places of refuge from civilization, or for eccentricities. But his characters also realize that the forests are retreating, and that even the most dense forests can no longer be considered safe havens from encroaching civilization, or places that can provide shelter from danger. The modern forest is more and more prone to human influence, be that from extensive deforestation, or from an ever-expanding tourist infrastructure. Most recently, environmental hazards that trigger the death of the forest and cause environmental depredation have become popular literary topics.

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In the novel *Die Wand (The Wall* set in the sixties, the postwar Austrian writer Marlen Haushofer situates her female protagonist quite literally behind a mysterious wall. Here, she finds herself alone in a picturesque portion of the Austrian Alps, the only human being around. She has to learn how to manage her allotted portion of the woods sustainably and care for her animals, which becomes a long and tedious process that leads to only partial success. Most importantly, the ending of this experiment remains unresolved.

Nobel Prize laureate Elfriede Jelinek's Austrian forests, however, are severely impacted by human activity, whether by expansive industrial logging or a dense system of tourist trails and roads. Loggers demand their right to work, and to harvest the forest as a resource for human development. Tourists demand access to trail systems for recreational purposes. Ski lifts are built everywhere, and forests give way to downhill ski slopes. Hikers, mountain bikers, and skiers crisscross through the last remaining continuous stretches of woods, and cars are able to fill up their tanks in remote gas stations and rest stops where there used to be nothing but forest.

The exploitative attitude of the loggers towards nature translates directly into their abusive attitudes towards women and family. The society of forest workers in Jelinek's play *Der Wald (The Forest)* has reached a point where it is simply destructive. Jelinek shapes this situation poetically by using nothing but found language and common phrases about the forest in her collage, a technique that she employs to create the effect of the forest spitting back all these clichés to the readers of the play (and to the audience in the theater.

Literature shapes both the forest and the process of deforestation poetically, by highlighting human attitudes toward nature in this process. Readers and audiences are able to form critical opinions about these issues by weighing the characters' perspectives against one another. Through these comparative techniques, literature contributes to the current discussion about environmental issues by promoting a more reflective and reflexive attitude toward forests and the processes of deforestation, which are accelerating at an alarming rate in our globalized world.

The Forest as Border

The Austrian nineteenth-century writer Adalbert Stifter's tale on the fate of the pitch burners, later renamed "Limestone" (first published in 1849 as "The Pitch Burners", eventually became part of the collection of stories entitled *Bunte Steine* (Colorful stones in 1853. In the story, a grandfather takes his grandson for a walk through a regional forest, after a tar salesman paints the boy's feet with oil and his mother gets angry with him for leaving oil stains on the floor of their house.

A block of granite. Photograph by Michiel Verbeek.

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In the beginning of the story, the grandson is sitting on a granite block right outside of his house and is enjoying an excellent view of the surroundings, albeit noticing the first encroachments of human settlements on the otherwise idyllic rural agricultural landscape:

> In front of the house in which my father was born, right next to the front door, there is a large octagonal rock that has the shape of a very long stretched-out die... . One of the younger members of our family that used to sit on this rock was myself during my childhood. I liked to sit on the rock since at least at that time one had a great view of the surroundings. Now it is completely obstructed by buildings.
>
> —Adalbert Stifter, "Granit," (1849), in *Bunte Steine* (München: Goldmann 1971), online at Projekt Gutenberg .

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The Kürnberg Forest near Linz. Photograph by Christian Wirth.

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> I was looking at the ploughed fields that did not yet have any buildings on them. Sometimes I saw a piece of glass that shimmered like a white igneous spark and that glowed, or I saw a vulture fly by, or I saw the far bluish forest that reached up to the sky with its pointed teeth where the storms and torrential rains come down and that reaches so high into the air that I thought that it was possible to touch the sky when one climbed the tallest tree.
>
> —Stifter, “Granit.”

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Grazing moorland sheep (*Heidschnucke*). Photograph by Willow.

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> On other days I saw sometimes a harvest carriage, sometimes a herd, sometimes a beggar walking on the road that passed close to the house.
>
> —Stifter, "Granit."

The forest becomes a buffer zone between nature and those areas that are increasingly influenced and shaped by humans: mainly agricultural lands, but also human settlements. In the later nineteenth century, forests are increasingly framed through the perspective of loss and retreat.

Endangered Virgin Forests

Aside from the literary treatment of forests as buffer zones to human encroachment, Adalbert Stifter was also intensely interested in the concept of virgin forests and their disappearance. The grandfather in Stifter's story "Limestone" tells his grandson about the forests near his home, which used to be much larger. To illustrate the vastness and significance of these larger virgin forests, the grandfather tells him a story about the pitch burners who used to live in and of the woods:

> “If the evening sun wasn’t shining so bright,” grandfather said, “and everything was floating in a fiery smoke, I would be able to show you the location about which I am going to tell you and that fits into our narrative. It is several hours by foot, just across from us where the sun sets, and there are located the right woods. There firs and spruces, alders and maples, beeches and other trees stand tall like kings, and the population of bushes and the thick crowds of grasses and herbs, flowers, berries, and moss are among them.”
>
> —Stifter, “Granit.”

Typical Central European mixed forest of pine, fur, and beech. Photograph by Nasenbär.

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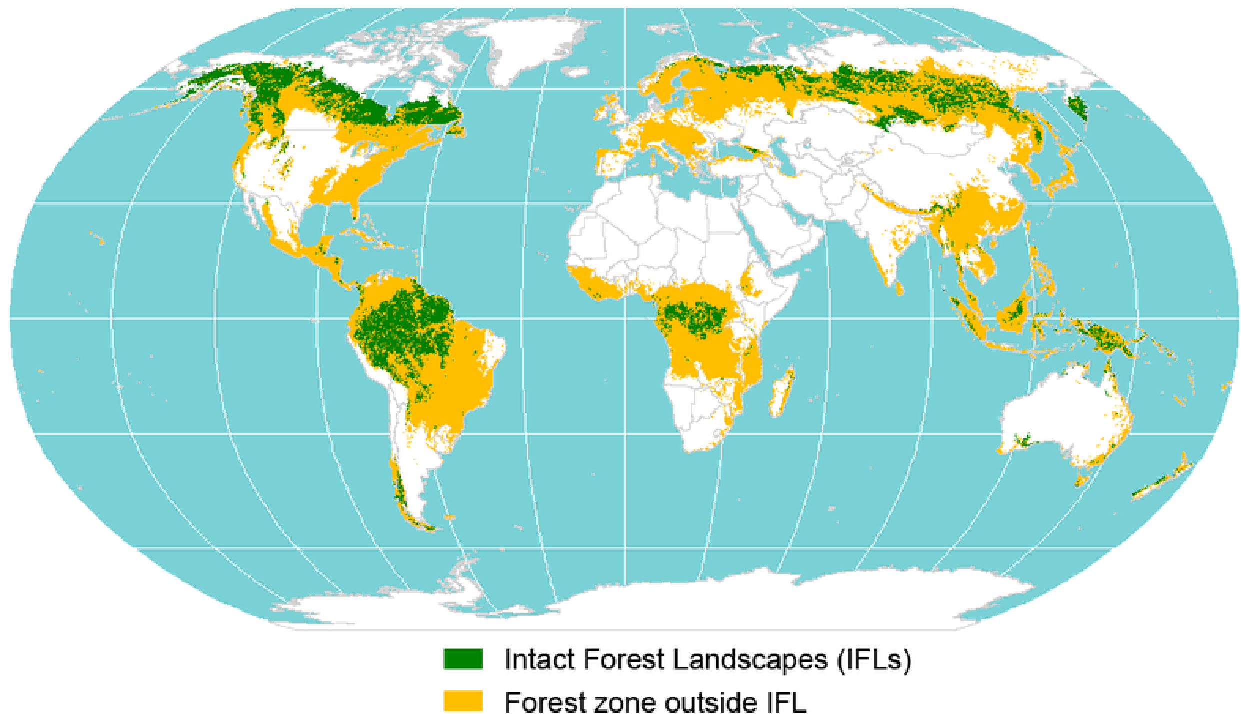
In the grandfather’s story, the pitch burners retreated into these “right forests” mainly to escape the growing threat of infection from the plague.

> “This pitch burner,” he continued, “wanted to avoid the general infestation that God imposed on humankind during the plague. He wanted to walk up to the deepest woods, where no one ever visits, where no air contaminated by people ever flows, where everything is different from below, and where he thought he could stay healthy... . But he went on further than where the lake is; he went all the way to where the woods are still in the state in which they were after creation, where

people had never worked in them, where trees never break as if they were hit by lightning or knocked down by wind; then the fallen tree is left lying down, and new trees and herbs are growing from its body; the trunks are standing tall, and between them are the flowers and grasses and herbs that have never been seen and touched."

—Stifter, "Granit."



Map of the world's intact forest landscapes. Graphic by Peter Potapov.

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Similarly to the characters wandering through the woods singing in romantic poetry, Stifter's grandfather still tries to read the book of nature as a system of allegorical signs, a system that is already showing the first signs of destruction and loss of traditional knowledge. The pitch burners are part of this culture of destruction and loss that no longer relates to the forest sustainably, but that prefigures the modern growing dependence on coal, gas, and oil in an accelerated process of modernization that is driven by the impending Industrial Revolution.

The Forest Beyond Humanity

A novel by the postwar Austrian writer Marlen Haushofer—*The Wall* (1963—tells the story of a woman who

accompanies a couple of friends to a hunting cabin located in a picturesque Alpine valley, near Salzburg. The woman suddenly finds herself trapped behind a mysterious wall, the only human survivor of an inexplicable environmental disaster that must have occurred on the other side of the wall.

With a hunting dog, a cat, and a pregnant cow, the female narrator is stuck in a relatively large but ultimately confined area of Alpine nature, and has to learn how to survive in this context. All the problems that she had in her urban existence are irrelevant as she needs to concentrate completely on surviving.

Drawing of a hunting cabin in the journal *Gartenlaube*. Joseph Schmittzberger, *Jagdhütte im Hochgebirge*, 1888.

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The challenge is to develop a lifestyle that is sustainable, one that guarantees the survival of her and her animals.

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A blooming alpine rose (*Rhododendron ferrogineum*). Photograph by Muriel Bendel.

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At about one o'clock in the afternoon I reached the path through the mountain pines, and sat down on a stone to rest. The forest lay hazily in the midday sun, and the warm scent from the pines floated up to me. Only now could I see that the alpine roses were in bloom.

—Marlen Haushofer, *The Wall* (1963), trans. Shaun Whiteside, (San Francisco: Cleis, 1990), 50–51.

They stretched in a red ribbon over the scree. It was now much quieter than in the moonlight at night, as if the forest lay paralyzed by sleep beneath the yellow sun. A bird of prey circled high in the blue sky, Lynx slept, his ears twitching, and the great silence descended on me like a bell-jar. I wished I could sit here for ever, in the warmth, in the light; the dog at my feet and the circling bird above.

—Haushofer, *The Wall.*

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A Eurasian griffon vulture. Photograph by Luc Viatour.

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> I had stopped thinking long since, as if my worries and memories no longer had anything to do with me. When I walked on I did so with deep regret, and on the way I slowly changed, becoming the only creature that didn't belong here, a person troubled by chaotic thoughts, cracking branches with her clumsy shoes and engaged in the bloody business of hunting.
>
> —Haushofer, *The Wall*.

Fleeing roe deer. Photograph by Teytaud.

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The human being is a disturbing factor in these Alpine woods, and as the text implies, it might be better for the forest if humans stayed away from it permanently. The author seems to suggest in her tale that only when humans are gone can there be true peace: a position not unlike that of some of the more radical strands of modern environmentalist thought.

Sustainable Living in the Forest

Marlen Haushofer's novel *The Wall* (1963) continues with the female narrator's self-reflexive commentary on the difficulties of becoming a human being who lives sustainably in her natural surroundings, when she herself was trained to simply take what she wanted in a modern consumer society that preached comfort and a surplus of resources.

> In fact, I enjoy living in the forest now, and I'll find it very difficult to leave it. But I shall come back, if I stay alive over on the other side of the wall. Sometimes I imagine how nice it would have been to bring up my children here in the forest. I think that would have been paradise for me.
>
> —Haushofer, *The Wall.*

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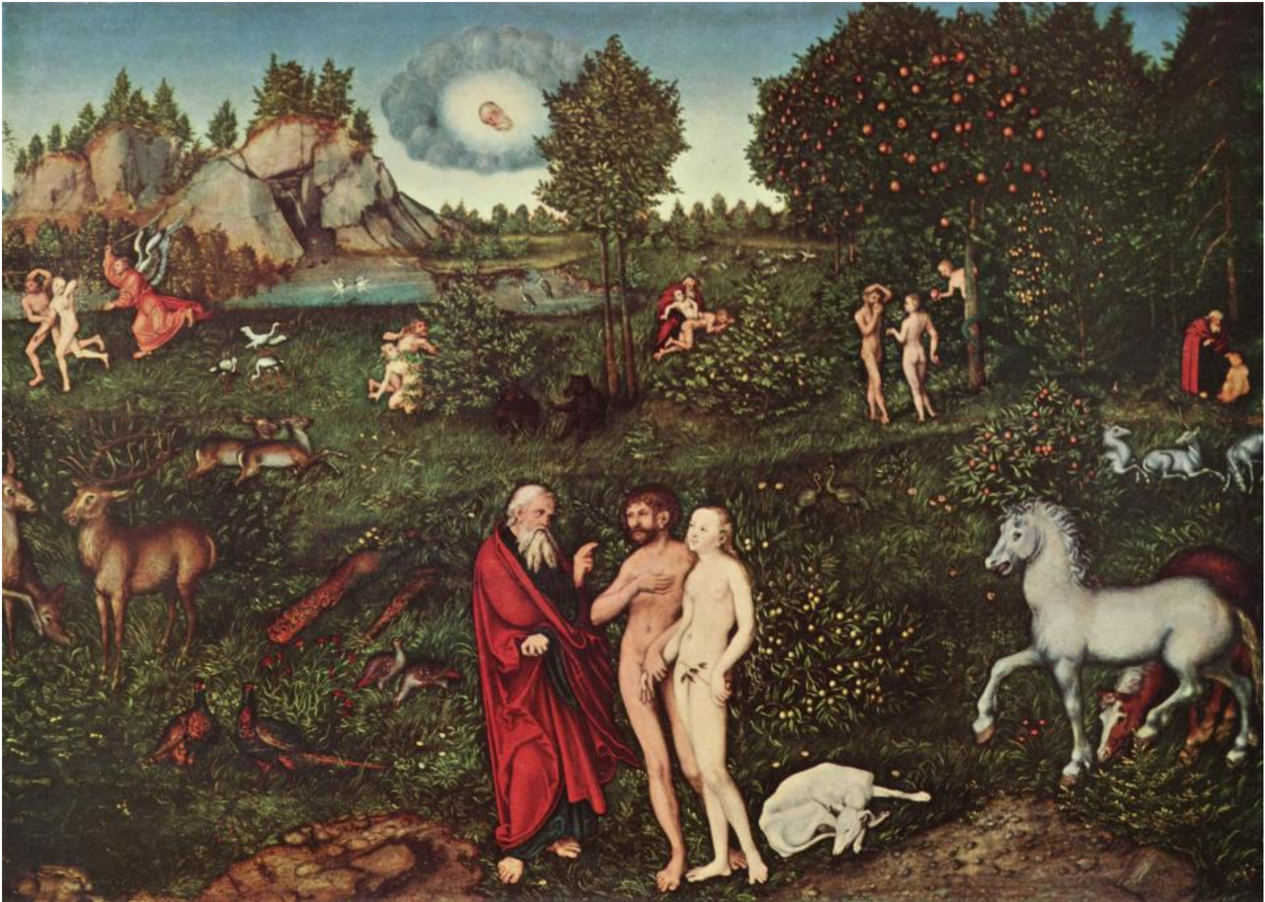

Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Paradies*, 1530. Oil on lime, 81 x 114 cm. Held by Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

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> But I doubt whether my children would have liked it that much. No, it wouldn't have been paradise. I don't believe that paradise ever existed. A paradise could exist only outside nature, and I can't imagine that kind of paradise. It bores me even to think about it: I have no desire for it
>
> —Haushofer, *The Wall*, 64–65.

This process of wrestling with a different attitude towards nature, one that is not based on conquest and the extraction of resources, is addressed thematically in the novel. However, it is not presented as a success story. The text simply ends when the protagonist runs out of paper, after four months of writing down her report of life behind the wall. There is no literary description of the forest and her life in it after that point in her adventure.

Wilke, Sabine. "Human-Nature Relations in German Literature: A Curated Stroll through a History of Entanglement." Environment & Society Portal, Virtual Exhibitions 2018, no. 4. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8150.
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> Today, the twenty-fifth of February, I shall end my report. There isn't a single sheet of paper left. It's now around five o'clock in the evening, and already so light that I can write without the lamp. The crows have risen, and circle screeching over the forest. When they are out of sight I shall go to the clearing and feed the white crow. It will already be waiting for me.
>
> —Haushofer, *The Wall,* 244.

Traces of a crow in snow. Photograph by Ramessos.

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In this story, Haushofer radicalizes Stifter's project of giving the forest a greater thematic presence by addressing the topic of sustainability from the forest's perspective. A sustainable relationship between humans and forests, according to the narrative, would be based on a perspective towards human-nature entanglements that emphasizes the essential connection between the two. Humans must refrain from considering themselves as conquerors of the forest who exercise dominion over the plants and animals that grow in it.

Forests as Discourse

An urban forest in Jakarta, Indonesia. Photograph by Yogas Design.

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In Nobel Prize laureate Elfriede Jelinek's 1985 play *Der Wald* (The forest), the forest itself is no longer present, neither as actor or narrator—as in the work of Stifter and Haushofer—nor as a setting for the play. Jelinek's forest only consists of words and discourse: it is a collage of common phrases describing the Austrian woods. Jelinek's montage technique draws attention to the political and cultural meaning of forests, especially in the context of contemporary Austria and its sustained efforts to destroy the last remnants of forests.

> Only three percent of Styria is covered with forests. Wouldn't we go into the forests if we were able to? ... We are ordered to form families, blind embryos. Exercise, ok, that is even meant for you, even if you are made out of plastic! Let's go and insult the ground with cross-country skiing!
>
> —Elfriede Jelinek, *Der Wald, manuskripte 89/90* (1985): 43–44, esp. 44.

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Cross-country skiers near Einsiedel. Photograph by Markus Bernet.

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> Why not, we are not hurting anyone, we are the cause of destruction ourselves. The forest, even more beautiful than I thought, wow! They capture even your sleep in small-budget video films.
>
> The forest is that which is beautiful, i.e., sublime gas stations during a modern car ride through the forest, on a highway that leads through it, by the way; a description of the highway is not necessary.
>
> —Jelinek, *Der Wald.*

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Newly cut road through the northern Bohemian Forest. Photograph by ŠJů.

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Jelinek's post-natural forest, which consists of nothing but discourse, is exclusively the product of human activity. It no longer has any value of its own beyond the empty phrases that make up the content of the play. Even the loggers that engage with the forest have a solely practical attitude towards it, an attitude that is mirrored in their abusive family relationships:

> They are lurking behind their ideal bonnet for a "family," that's how they hide themselves these birth defects and wage earners. They better shelter the forest from themselves. But they are covering the company towns and self-built family homes of the timber workers with their toxic veils.
>
> Where the timber workers are dissecting their women into individual components in order to check whether or not improvements can be made by repairs.
>
> —Jelinek, *Der Wald,* 43.

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Workers' housing complexes in Marienthal near Gramatneusiedl/Niederösterreich. Photograph by Joadl.

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The speakers in Jelinek's play are preoccupied with money and social capital, an attitude that has completely replaced any genuine concern for the forests. The only perspective that counts is economic gain and short-term profit. These people have completely sold out to corporate interests and the tourism industry. Sustainable attitudes towards the forests are absent.

Related Links

Wikipedia article on the film *Die Wand (The Wall*)

Wikipedia article on Haushofer's novel *Die Wand* (*The Wall*)

Elfriede Jelinek's website

Websites linked in this text:

- http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/bunte-steine-197/3
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wall_(2012_drama_film)
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wall_(novel)
- http://www.elfriedejelinek.com/

Websites linked in image captions:

- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Die_Gartenlaube_(1888)_b_045.jpg
- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Schokland,_zwerfsteen_bij_ingang_museum-restaurant_foto6_2013-04-28_13.02.jpg
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- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lucas_Cranach_(I)_-_Adam_and_Eve-Paradise_-_Kunsthistorisches_Museum.jpg
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Pollution and Waste

Water and Waterways
Waste in/and Modernity
Cities and Human Waste
Polluted Landscapes
Nuclear Pollution
Related Links

The topics of pollution and waste in German-language writing reach back to the nineteenth century, when the production of industrial waste—and pollution of the air, ground, and water—first began to occur on a massive scale. The beginning of the nineteenth century was still relatively free of waste in the modern sense of the word. Farms, private households, and even larger factories did not produce waste as we know it today. Plastic had not been invented, there were no single-use containers, cheap imported goods, or fossil fuel-based products, and common people just did not have houses full of "stuff." Objects, clothes, and other artifacts would have been reused. There was no organic waste either, as all food scraps were used for meals, were composted, or fed to farm animals.

A mountain of garbage. Photograph by Ger1axg.

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One way of conceptualizing pollution and waste is to think about these processes in terms of open and closed cycles. To avoid waste and pollution, the aim is to keep everything that is produced within a closed cycle, in which nothing gets lost and all materials are reused. This is the basic idea behind the “cradle to cradle” concept, which is based on the premise that in healthy cycles, all natural products function as nourishment for something else and don’t need to be separated and recycled. Michael Braungart and William McDonough pioneered this idea in their 2002 book *Cradle to Cradle: Rethinking the Way We Make Things*.

Literature can often register the phenomenon of open cycles, and the related problem of waste production. The realist poet Wilhelm Raabe was the first writer to tackle the theme of waste and pollution in German literature toward the end of the nineteenth century. In *Pfisters Mühle* (Pfister’s Mill, a novel about a mill and its economic decline, Raabe draws attention to the increasing problems caused by industrial waste that is dumped into the local streams without regulation or legal consequences.

Raabe tells the history of a stream that feeds a mill. Over the course of the story, more and more signs of pollution appear. This eventually forces the mill owner out of business. The source of pollution is a sugar factory which dumps its wastewater upstream, a practice that causes the rapid growth of bacteria in the water. In his novel, Raabe illustrates the problems with open cycles and the breaking apart of formerly closed cycles.

As pollution increased throughout the twentieth century, German literature began to focus more directly and openly on waste and toxic pollution. The German critic Walter Benjamin, who fled from the Nazis and took his own life at a Spanish port just before embarking on a vessel for America, composed a series of philosophical theses on the concept of history in 1940 shortly before he died. In these theses, he laid the foundation for a theory of the (historical waste that is produced in a society struggling with problematic and complex historical processes. These processes are rooted in a culture of dumping, separation, storage, and waste removal. As Benjamin imagines his figure of the angel of history who is completely helpless in face of the constantly growing heap of waste in front of him, he also creates an allegory of the open cycles and the toxic production processes embraced by modern society.

Postwar literature no longer only addresses the problems of pollution and waste metaphorically or allegorically. It also openly addresses the processes of separation and waste removal and even radicalizes them by showing how humans participate in these cycles and become waste themselves.

The German filmmaker, actor, and playwright Rainer Werner Fassbinder was known for his experimental theater work and his involvement with New German Cinema. Fassbinder painted a bleak picture of German society in the seventies, one that embraced economic development at all costs. In his play *Garbage, the City, and Death,* Fassbinder used the example of the Frankfurt banking quarter where skyscrapers replaced an old and traditional neighborhood in which humans had resided and made their livings for centuries. These humans therefore become waste in a system that creates poverty and relies on speculation in the never-ending search for profit.

In a similarly critical take on society, a poet and playwright of the German Democratic Republic, Heiner Müller, wrote a play based on Medea, which takes place on the shores of a completely polluted East German lake outside of Berlin. The shore is littered with industrial and human waste, and is not fit for human habitation. Müller focuses on the figure of Medea, who cuts up her children and serves them to her husband Jason in order to highlight the processes of waste production that lie at the core of modern societies.

These powerful literary images and philosophical concepts illustrate the violence that is inherent in the production of waste. These open processes can have devastating consequences for the environment, and the humans who live in these environments.

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Water and Waterways

Nineteenth-century novelist Wilhelm Raabe's *Pfisters Mühle* (Pfister's Mill), 1884, is perhaps the earliest German-language literary source to tackle the subject of pollution. In this novel, a miller is struggling with the consequences of the chemical pollution of his stream due to toxic wastewater dumped upstream by a sugar factory. In the end, even though he wins his case in court, he is nevertheless so exhausted from fighting this problem that he gives up his business and hangs his miller's axe up on the wall.

Water polluted with tin cans and other garbage. Photograph by Luther C. Goldman, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

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After he dies, his son Ebert Pfister—who teaches in a high school in Berlin—travels back to Pfister's Mill with his young wife in order to spend a month of the summer in the place where he grew up, before selling the property and tearing it down to make room for his friend's dry cleaning business.

A twelfth-century water mill. Photograph by Jean-Pol Grandmont.

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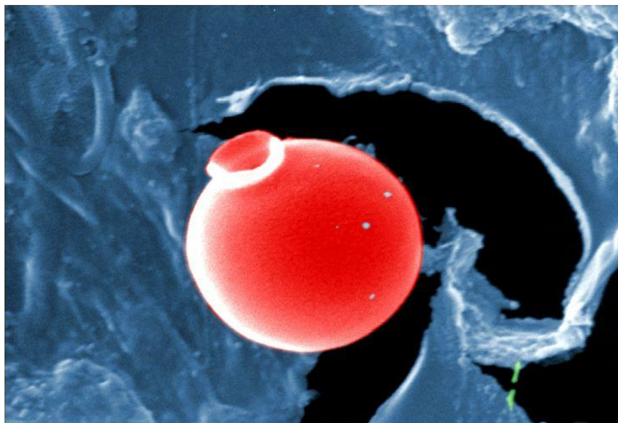
Over the course of the month, Ebert writes down the history of the mill's downfall in a scrapbook, beginning with how it started to smell bad. He recalls a scene in which his father came to visit him in the city where he lived at that time in order to complain about the situation at home in the following words:

> I can no longer tolerate being engulfed in this deadly foul smell all the time without doing something up about it... . If there is science and justice, they should work in favor of both of us – Pfister's Mill and myself – or we will both close down the business.
>
> —Wilhelm Raabe, *Pfisters Mühle. Ein Sommerferienheft* (1884). In *Sämtliche Werke,* vol. 16, ed. Hans Oppermann (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 1970), 258.

The foul smell is caused by the algae that are slowly but steadily growing in the stream and covering it like a carpet. The algae are beginning to threaten the father's mill business and the smell is keeping the customers of his outdoor tavern away, a business he is operating on the side during the summer months for some extra money.



Unidentified organisms, including bacteria, protozoa, and algae. Photograph by Janice Haney Carr, USCDCP.

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> The lively and clear river that rushed and murmured through my childhood days and early youth as the epitome of everything that was fresh and pure was now a sluggishly creeping, slimy, white-bluish something that truly could no longer serve as an image of life and purity for anybody. Slimy threads hung down from the branches of those bushes that were lining the shore and that high tide was able to reach and from the willows that reached down to where the water was. Especially the reeds were ugly to look at ...
>
> —Raabe, *Pfisters Mühle,* 265.

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An old mill in Nordrach, Germany. Photograph by Peter Poschadel.

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Ebert's childhood friend and mentor Asche, on the other hand, who is a trained chemist and experiments with the chemical processes of dry cleaning, is thinking about opening the first dry cleaning business in town. Asche knows that every modernization process requires some sort of sacrifice in return.

> A person like myself [Asche] who has the best of intentions of polluting a bubbling spring, a crystalline brook, a majestic river, in short any waterway in the idyllic green German Empire as soon as possible and as infamously as possible, is no longer allowed to say that he would give his heart's blood in order to keep that good old guy's mill brook clean!
>
> —Raabe, *Pfisters Mühle,* 289.

Many dry cleaners place cleaned clothes inside thin clear plastic garment bags. Photograph by Simon Law.

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After his father's death, and after spending an entire month of the summer in the mill writing down the story of its downfall, Ebert decides to sell the business and invest the proceeds into Asche's newly opened dry cleaning business. In this way, the story has an ironic ending where everyone involved walks away with a profit.

Waste in/and Modernity

In modern German literature, themes of air and water pollution are often framed in terms of images of industrial waste, and of materials that are used in the production processes characteristic of modern global capitalism.

In his philosophical essay on the concept of history from 1940, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," the German philosopher and cultural theorist Walter Benjamin treats the theme of historical waste as part of a theory of society that reflects critically on the unsustainable foundations of modern wastefulness. In this essay, Benjamin rethinks the philosophical idea of history in terms of a process of systematic accumulation of historical waste:

Plastic containers among water lilies. Photograph by Ryan Hagerty.

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Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920. Oil transfer and watercolor on paper, 31.8 x 24.2 cm. Held by the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

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A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history.

—Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), 259–60.

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

—Benjamin, *Illuminations*.

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A mountain of garbage. Photograph by Ger1axg.

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The debris that is building up in front of the angel of history contains the waste of history, and the angel is no longer able to "make whole what has been smashed." In a departure from common interpretations of this passage that foreground political history, it is productive to connect Benjamin's theory of history with an environmental perspective. As dead waste, the debris has been separated from the closed cycle it was part of and can no longer be put back together again by the angel. In his apocalyptic vision, Benjamin ties political history to the processes of material production and wastefulness that are at the core of modern consumer societies.

Cities and Human Waste

In *Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod* (*Garbage, the City, and Death)*, a controversial play written in 1975 while he was director of one of the independent Frankfurt theaters, the German playwright, actor, and filmmaker Rainer

Werner Fassbinder deals with the themes of uninhabitable modern city centers, and of the human waste created by these desolate landscapes. At the time the play was written, Frankfurt was at the beginning of an enormous postwar German economic development boom. Its Western suburb was remaking itself into Europe's banking metropolis and financial center, with ugly corporate high rises quickly replacing older and less affluent neighborhoods where people had lived and worked for generations. Fassbinder was part of the squatters' movement that protested against this development.

The controversy over this play, however, had nothing to do with waste, but with Fassbinder's decision to include a figure in the play that he called "A, the rich Jew" who finances the city's urban and economic development. This character was modeled after Ignatz Bubis, a prominent Jewish citizen of Frankfurt and leader in Germany's central Jewish political organization. Consequently, the play was banned from the stage until its first German-language premiere in 2009. The material did, however, make it into a film in 1976 with Fassbinder in the leading role as pimp Franz B. and Fassbinder's ex-wife, Ingrid Caven, in the role of the prostitute Roma B. Many other well-known German stage actors, such as Klaus Löwith who played A, the rich Jew, and Boy Gobert, who played the mayor of Frankfurt, also took part.

The European Central Bank in Frankfurt. Photograph by Epizentrum.

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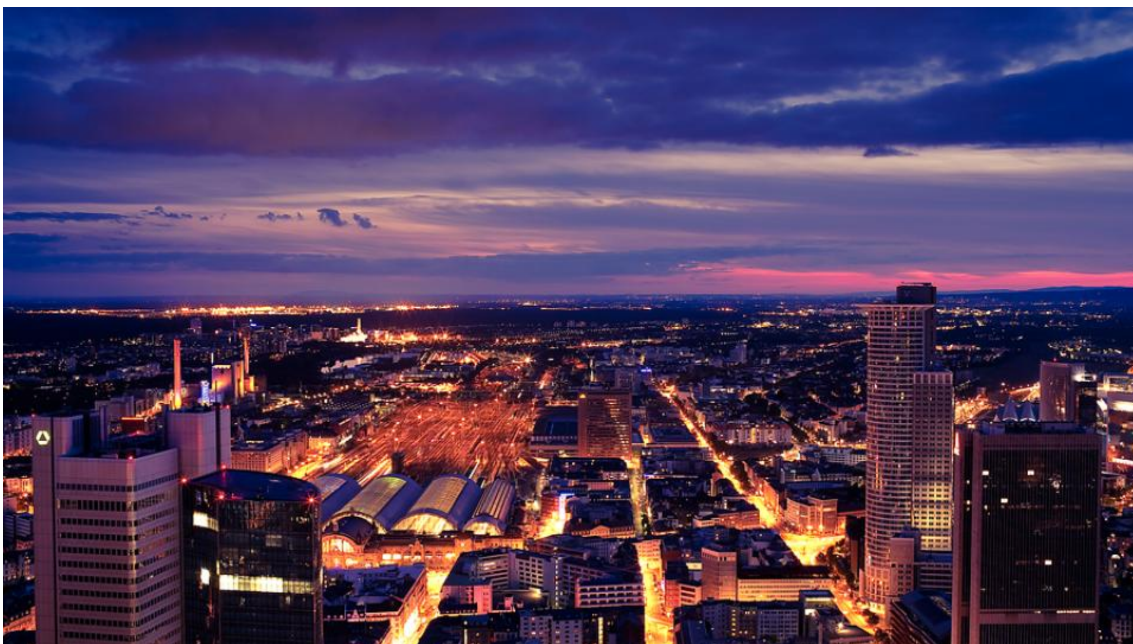
In his play, Fassbinder radicalizes the processes of waste production and removal that are attached to such rapid urban development, by applying them to the production and removal of human waste. People are separated from closed cycles: they are killed and thrown onto a heap of garbage like waste products. In this allegory, people are literally treated like garbage by the local politicians and developers. The prostitute Roma B. is at the very bottom of all levels of society in every respect—as a slave to her husband/pimp, and as a call girl for the rich developer—until she eventually asks him for her death:

> The city is transforming us into living corpses, figures from a horror movie without the proper cabinet of horrors, existing at below-grade living conditions, with streets that poison us where we can still be poisoned... . I don't want to live that kind of life anymore, God. I want to give it to someone else, want to make myself into a victim, for the city's sake that needs victims in order to seem alive, and last but not least in order to save myself, i.e., save myself from death in a life that makes me equivalent to those who forgot what life is, those who have become dull and speechless and who figure they are happy and forgot that they are not and who no longer grow teeth with which they can defend themselves in the jungle.
>
> —Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod, Nur eine Scheibe Brot* (Frankfurt 1998), 85-86.



Frankfurt am Main by night. Photograph by photomek.

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The characters in Fassbinder's play figuratively stare at a mountain of waste that is constantly growing, not unlike Walter Benjamin's angel of history, who is staring at the pile of debris and would like to stitch the pieces back together again to no avail. Fassbinder's play works as an allegory for a planet that has become uninhabitable, where the remnants of a murderous social system and a system of production that generates waste are piled up high and cannot be stitched back together again.

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Polluted Landscapes

Anthony Frederick Augustus Sandys, *Medea*, 1866–68. Oil on wood, 61.2 x 45.6 cm. Held by Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

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In his 1983 postmodern Medea play, *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten* (*Despoiled Shore, Medea Material, Landscape with Argonauts)*, the GDR playwright, director, and poet Heiner Müller transplants the story of Medea from the North African desert and the Mediterranean shores to the shores of a polluted lake just outside Berlin. The shore of the lake is dirty, and the lake itself is totally polluted with garbage (including used tampons, empty bottles, and even parts of human corpses.

At the end of the play, Medea lies at the bottom of the lake, holding the pieces of the hacked-apart Brother in her arms, in an allegory of the destructive future of Western civilization viewed from an East German perspective. It is important to acknowledge that Müller's critique of Western civilization, and the impasse of the Cold War, is tied to a critique of contemporary production processes and consumption habits, which are also at an impasse.

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In *Medea Material*, Müller's Medea asks Jason to leave her the children for one more day, after which she promises to return to her desert. *Landscape with Argonauts* is a short scene in which the landscape is littered with garbage. In Müller's play, this landscape full of waste literally becomes a dramatic character, and, like a chorus, it speaks in the first person. The trick Müller is applying here is that the scene presupposes the (environmental) catastrophes enacted by mankind.

A lakeside polluted by garbage and wreckage. Photograph by USFWS.

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My
Walk through the outskirts I My death
In the rain of bird droppings In the hide of lime
The anchor is the last umbilical cord
With the horizon the memory of the coast slips away
Birds as a farewell Are a reunion
The slaughtered tree It ploughs the snake the ocean
Thin between the I No more I the hull

...

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A fast food container in the forest. Photograph by Netzschrauber.

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SAILORS BRIDE IS THE SEA

The dead they say stand on the bottom
Upright swimmers Until the bones rest
Mating of fish in the corroded chest
Shoals of mussels on the skull
Thirst is fire

…

Natives of the concrete parade
Of zombies perforated by TV spots
In the uniforms of yesterday morning's fashion
The youth of today ghosts of
The dead of the war that is to happen tomorrow
YET WHAT REMAINS IS CREATED BY BOMBS

—Heiner Müller, *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage*, ed. and trans. Carl Weber (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1984), 133–34.

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Heiner Müller's theatrical legacy is the use of the "synthetic fragment" structure in his plays, which rethinks the didactic model of theater that he learned from Brecht. In Müller's play, this landscape of waste becomes a synthetic fragment in which waste is reintroduced into daily reality, but as debris of waste and hastily stitched back together, a process that Walter Benjamin's angel of history was no longer able to perform. With the help of the synthetic fragmentation technique, the readers and spectators of the scene are forced to look at and acknowledge the garbage that their society and consumption habits have produced. As a synthetic fragment, the polluted landscape becomes estranged and, in the Brechtian fashion, demands reflection on the causes of this pollution.

Nuclear Pollution

A cooling tower emitting steam. Photograph by Ryan Hagerty.

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Christa Wolf, a writer from the GDR, engages with the theme of nuclear pollution in her 1987 narrative, *Accident: A Day's News*. In this tale, as she listens to the local radio station, Wolf painstakingly records her reaction to the news about the nuclear accident in Chernobyl, which unravels over the course of a day in April 1986. The narrator finds herself alone in her country retreat in rural Mecklenburg outside of East Berlin, trying to come to grips with the news of the accident. At the same time, she is waiting to hear the results of her brother's brain surgery, which is also taking place that morning. The narrative connects her critical reflections on nuclear technology to her faith in medical technology in complex and interesting ways.

> The first mammals presumably developed around two hundred million years ago from mammal-like reptiles in the battle over ecological niches—a way of existence crucially dependent on hearingand smell, senses of distance which were thus treated to preferential development. A few branches of the vertebrate family tree led to dead ends. It remains to be seen whether that branch which resulted in the human being will also lead to a dead end.
>
> —Christa Wolf, *Accident: A Day's News*, trans. Heike Schwarzbauer and Rick Takvorian (New York: Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 1989), 44–45.

This principle of splitting, which is at the core of nuclear technology, is linked critically to reflections on how the brain works. The narrator wonders:

> How strange that a-tom in Greek means the same as in-dividuum in Latin: Unsplittable. The inventors of these words knew neither nuclear fission nor schizophrenia. Whence the modern compulsion to split into ever smaller parts, to split off entire parts of the personality from that ancient being once thought indivisible ... No surgeon could penetrate through to that hectic group of neural connections in the brains of those men who thought up the procedures for the so-called utilization of energy.
>
> —Wolf, *Accident,* 29.

Wolf's narrator suggests that there is a connection between physics and the make-up of an individual personality, and therefore between the principle of energy and the psychological make-up of a split personality. The human being becomes an evolutionary cul-de-sac, in which desire is motivated by violence.

> Highly gifted, very young men who—driven, I fear, by the hyperactivity in certain centers of their brains—have not signed a pact with the devil (oh, brother! The good old devil! Would that he still existed!), but rather with the fascination with a technical problem.
>
> —Wolf, *Accident,* 62.

Literature is able to counteract this development by focusing on this violence, visualizing connections between parts, and exploring what Wolf calls, in reference to Joseph Conrad, the heart of darkness (the modern inclination to split everything into smaller parts). Nuclear pollution is the consequence of this principle gone haywire.

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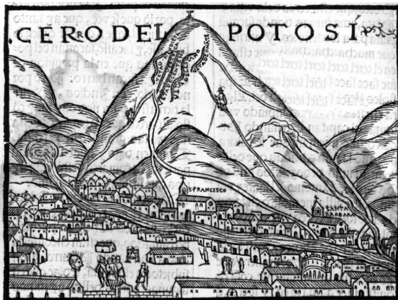

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