

# ***Environmental Fantasies: German Film History for the Anthropocene***

*Seth Peabody*

Ecocriticism arrived late in Germany. One frequently cited reason for this is the lack of a strong nature writing tradition in Germany compared to the United States. For studies of cinema, however, no such excuse exists. From the first decades of the German film industry through today, some of German film history's most prominent genres and directors have focused explicitly on the natural world and its transformations through human intervention. The German *Heimatfilm* genre offers a case in point: these films often blur the boundary between nature documentary and rural melodrama. The physical environment plays a similarly prominent role in German city symphonies, mountain films, and rubble films. Yet an environmental focus has remained largely absent from German film studies, which have focused instead on the (admittedly complex) political contexts and implications of German film history.

My project traces the contours of environmental discourse in German cinema. German film offers a productive object for ecocritical study precisely because the physical environment is overtly intertwined with political and social concerns. Contemporary critics remarked on the linkage of environmental image and political positioning in Arnold Fanck's mountain films, Walter Ruttmann's city symphony of Berlin, and the postwar *Heimat* films; in other words, there has never been a time when these films were understood to show nature through a neutral lens.

The book's first section carries out an environmental analysis of *Heimat*, the German concept of home, in film. Most *Heimatfilm* studies have examined the nostalgic rural films of the 1950s; I add interwar examples that reveal a much more diverse discourse. Within Weimar film, "Heimat" functioned as a contested environmental term that various groups used to reimagine a changing landscape. The second section delves more explicitly into the connections between cinema and environmental change by examining the intersections of infrastructure, environment, and film in the Weimar era, focusing especially on mountain films such as *Der heilige Berg* (Arnold Fanck, 1926) and filmic cityscapes in such works as *Berlin, die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927) and *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927). The final section examines German films from the 1970s through the present. Recent filmmakers have engaged with the often problematic sociopolitical implications of prior environmental films, while also using the power of film to weigh in on environmental transformations. Recent films thus self-consciously reflect on a film history that is interwoven with environmental history. As a whole, I argue that German cinema has served as a privileged site for negotiating, and influencing, the social and ecological transformations of the Anthropocene.