# Fertile Goddesses and Aryan Peasants: Themes of Ecology in Nazi State-Sponsored Painting

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Bachelor's Thesis

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*I would like the thesis to be made public.

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## Introduction

Nazi environmental politics remains a highly contested subject of scholarly inquiry. It is still difficult to imagine that a government that built gas chambers, waged war across Europe and North Africa, and was one of the most genocidal institutions in human history also undertook significant advancements in organic farming, passed forest protection laws, and set up the first nature preserves in Europe.[1] On closer inspection, these two seemingly conflictual politics of racial genocide and environmental protection, respectively, went hand in hand as anti-Semitic, anti-modern, broadly racist, and fundamentally mythical ideas became the driving forces of both areas of Nazi state policy.[2] This thesis will argue, however, that Nazi ideas about art and aesthetics—often-overlooked elements of National Socialist ideology—provide significant insight into this rather bizarre intersection between ecological protectionism and National Socialism.

In a state where a single man held absolute power and controlled all aspects of cultural expression, including artistic life, art functioned as an inherently political tool of National Socialist ideology.[3] It is not surprising, therefore, that the pseudo-scientific and philosophical ideas on which Nazi state-sponsored art—especially painting—was based overlapped with ideas that proved significant for the formation of the country's environmental policy. The question therefore arises of what art—in a society that deemed it important enough to be distributed through postcards, photographs and posters—can tell us about the way the environment and nature were viewed.

Unfortunately, this question remains significantly undertheorized, as art historians still find the period—one in which many artists witnessed their works being burned to make way for a state-approved fascist aesthetics—simply too traumatic. It is also not surprising that it took almost 50 years in Germany for the first public debate about Nazi art to take place.[4] With

far-right and neo-fascist politics on the rise once again,[5] however, the discussion about visualizations of fascism becomes only more urgent, taking on an unexpected new level of societal relevance. As this thesis will show, the often politically volatile notions of environment and beauty can be (and often were) used for the advancement of exclusionary politics. Analysis of these two concepts should therefore be valuable in the critical contextualization of neo-fascist groups reviving similar tactics to gain broader political support.

By trying to answer the question, *How were notions of ecology represented in Nazi state-sponsored painting?*, this thesis aims to bring the two fields of art and politics together and thereby advance this long-avoided but politically significant discussion about the intertwining of aesthetics with fascism and ecology.

This thesis has its foundations in the politics of aesthetics. It is concerned with how the fascist aesthetics that developed in Nazi Germany portrayed far-right notions of ecology. Given the significantly more developed literature on Nazi environmentalism, this thesis begins by reviewing existing literature specifically concerning the nexus of Nazi art and aesthetics with the environment and ecology. In doing so, it sheds light on the underutilization of visual art sources in the discourse on Nazi environmentalism. The thesis proceeds to its theoretical framework, introducing Crispin Sartwell's theory of political aesthetics. The thesis then outlines its methodology and justifies the selection of paintings to be analyzed. Drawing on the existing scholarly literature, as well as on early 20th-century Nazi literature hitherto largely neglected, the thesis next considers the Nazi conceptualization of ecology and aesthetics. Specifically, the thesis examines the relationship between pseudo-scientific understandings of race and environment and ideas about aesthetics and philosophical notions of beauty. It then analyzes how these ideas were transformed into actual policies that shaped the world of artistic production, dissemination, and reception in Nazi Germany. In the third part, the thesis identifies three paintings representative of salient painting genres in the Third Reich as case studies.

Using visual analysis and the theory of political aesthetics, the thesis asks how these paintings depict the environment and nature, and how these representations can contribute to the existing scholarly understanding of Nazi environmental politics.

**Literature Review**

The existing literature offers only limited insight into the visual representation of National Socialist notions of ecology. Most works on visual art under Nazism, even as recently as the 2019 study *Nostalgia for the Future: Modernism and Heterogeneity in the Visual Arts of Nazi Germany*, completely neglect the topic of visualization of environmental politics.[6] Furthermore, works written about the political meaning of landscapes and nature in the history of European painting broadly, such as the study by Martin Warnke, only briefly mention it.[7] The latter paradoxically begins its discussion with the horrific realization that the term "political landscape" was coined by no other than Joseph Goebbels, the infamous Third Reich Minister of Propaganda, but then proceeds to analyze the political meaning of landscapes in paintings while omitting the whole period of National Socialist art.[8]

The most comprehensive collection of work dealing with the visual representation of nature in Nazi Germany is a 2022 issue of the German art history journal *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* titled "Art and Environment in the Third Reich."[9] An article in the issue by Matthew Vollgraff on "Race and Landscape" discusses (among other subjects) the theoretical work of the influential Nazi architect and art theorist Paul Schultze-Naumburg.[10] Vollgraff argues that the Nazis, taking ideas from Schultze-Naumburg's 1928 publication *Kunst und Rasse* (*Art and Race*), conceptualized the visual representation of the landscape as the racial expression of the people that live in it.[11] Pointing to a 1942 SS manual that compares a picture-perfect German farm to an old, dilapidated Ukrainian one, Vollgraff argues that the Nazis believed that, "Nordic genetic material persists unchanged over the course of millennia: where

race is made the sole constant in history, nature becomes a construct."[12] These ideas about the relationship between humans and the environment are, in Vollgraff's view, embodied in the works of the architect and designer Richard Riemerschmidt, photographer August Sander, and painter Werner Peiner.[13]

Though useful, Vollgraff's article also includes a number of troubling omissions and oversimplifications. Firstly, it mostly limits itself to the representation of landscape, neglecting other topics such as gender and its relation to the environment. Secondly, the article claims to assess the impact of Schultze-Naumburg's most influential ideas, but neglects his 1932 *Kampf um die Kunst* (*Struggle over Art*), which the thesis argues to be of equal importance in Schultze-Naumburg's ideological project. Indeed, the philosophical ideas about art proposed in *Kampf um die Kunst* served as a manual for Nazi art policies and Nazi-sponsored artists.[14] Including these ideas is therefore essential when considering the overlap of ideas that formed the basis of both environmental and art policies in Nazi Germany. Lastly, Vollgraff's article oversimplifies the complex debate in the 1930s between Schultze-Naumburg and Edmund Husserl's student, the racial phenomenologist Ludwig Ferdinand Clauß, about the possibility of portraying race through art. As this thesis argues, the contrast between Clauß and Schultze-Naumburg should be conceived as central to the discussion of National Socialist ideas about environmentalism in painting. The thesis attempts to remedy some of the shortcomings of Vollgraff's approach in a later chapter about the Nazis' philosophical understanding of art.

Perhaps the second most comprehensive work on the intersection between aesthetics and Nazi environmentalism is Hannah Shaw's 2022 study, which argues that August Sander's 1933 series of peasant photographs represent a visual manifestation of National Socialist ideas about ecology.[15] Shaw pays particular attention to exploring Nazi ideas about farming (as introduced by Richard Walter Darré), *Blut und Boden* (*Blood and Soil*), and the German *Volk*.[16]

Shaw argues that a farmer, as captured by Sander, became a key symbol of a Native Aryan, indigenous to the German land and supposedly best equipped to take care of the environment.[17]

Similar claims about the iconography of the farmer (this time, in painting) are also present in the recent publication, *Art in the Third Reich: Seduction and Distraction.*[18] An interview with Dr. Jelle Bouwhuis, one of the authors of the book, has been conducted specifically for this thesis. Remarks from the interview appear in this thesis' sections on the art world and painting in Nazi Germany. *Art in the Third Reich* accompanied an exceptionally well-curated recent exhibition in Museum Arnhem, itself a significant source of inspiration for this thesis.[19] Multiple chapters of the book briefly touch on the visual representation of Nazi ecology, discussing works by Julius Paul Junghanns, Julius Ussy Engelhard, Leopold Schmutzler, Adolf Ziegler, and others.[20] In comparison to other existing works on the topic of National Socialist art, *Art in the Third Reich* initiates discussion of a number of previously neglected topics, including the portrayal of gender in relation to the environment. Being primarily art-historical, the book is less interested in some of the philosophical and political elements that this thesis treats as central to a comprehensive understanding of ecofascism in Nazi painting.

The thesis aims to close some of the gaps in the scholarship identified, drawing on existing work in political science by Peter Staudenmaier, Sam Moore and Alex Roberts, Hikmet Kuran, Susan Power Bratton, and other contributors to the topic of Nazi environmentalism.[21] Although significant and insightful, these works from the political science literature are often more interested in constructing political narratives, looking mainly at speeches and propaganda texts from the period. This is not surprising, as we often tend to think that political ideologies and narratives get constructed through written or oral discourse. As Crispin Sartwell asserts, however, political systems appear in different mediums, of which texts and speeches form only a portion.[22]

Political science works that take texts as the only material of analysis while neglecting other mediums through which ideological structures communicate themselves therefore risk missing crucial elements of political narratives. It is important to note here that this is not a limitation inherent to political science itself. Rather, the point is that specifically textual analysis, when used as the only medium of inquiry, risks limiting the full potential of political science. On a more positive note, this might actually suggest an opportunity for us to re-think the way we approach political science and, by doing so, discover fresh perspectives on significant debates. This thesis, therefore, takes a unique approach, combining the fields of politics, aesthetics, and art history, and using them to build a more comprehensive account of the intersections between Nazi environmentalism and state-sponsored painting.

**Theoretical Framework**

From Walter Benjamin's "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" to Jacques Rancière's *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, questions about art's ability to construct political realities have proved central.[23] This thesis draws heavily on the theory of political aesthetics. As proposed by Crispin Sartwell, political aesthetics treats political systems as pervasive "environments of aesthetics," rather than as being primarily composed of textual doctrines.[24] The theory rejects the traditional divide between the two fields of politics and aesthetics, arguing that epistemic, moral, and aesthetic values intersect at each actual political site.[25] The theory does not concern itself as much with the "politics of design systems," as with the "design of political systems"; it looks to art and aesthetics to inform the field of politics. In this way, the theory is especially relevant for this thesis, facilitating the conceptualization of intersections between Nazi politics, environmentalism, and art policy.

As Murray Edelman argues in his comprehensive work on art and politics, art does not represent reality, but rather, it creates it.[26] Since human beings perceive and receive ideas

through narratives, images, and pictures, art remains central to the formation of social relations and beliefs about the world—relations and beliefs that then inform political perceptions, commitments and practices.[27] Murray also emphasizes that the realities and meanings which works of art create never exist in a vacuum, but are always socially bound. In Murray's view, the meanings of works of art are never "given, but always taken," acquiring their meaning within the context of political systems.[28] A painting of a peasant chosen for public display by the Nazi leadership may not have been inherently ideological, for example, but the fact that it was chosen for display at all does tell us something about Nazi ideology and its visual expression. In this way, a thorough understanding of Nazi aesthetics and Nazi environmental policy is essential in analyzing the meanings ascribed to Nazi state-sponsored painting.

**Methodology and Case Selection**

The thesis employs both theoretical and visual analysis, drawing on Nazi notions of ecology and aesthetics to shed light on the intersections between Nazi environmental politics and state-sponsored painting. Following Gillian Rose, this thesis first considers the socio-political circumstances under which Nazi state-sponsored painting emerged.[29] The thesis emphasizes painting over other forms of art because of its wide distribution and imaginative range; as Roger Griffin argues, painting, "a medium of almost endless possibilities," represented a privileged medium for National Socialists to portray their imagined ideas about the world.[30]

This paper takes three paintings as case studies: Julius Paul Junghanns' *Plowing* (1940), Adolf Wissel's *Peasant Family from Kalenberg* (1939), and Friedrich Wilhelm Kalb's *Pandora* (1943). These works are not merely prime examples of the genres popular under National Socialism, but also, it will be argued, represent the most striking and complex examples of the visual manifestation of Nazi notions of ecology.[31]

All three paintings chosen as case studies were displayed at the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (*Great German Art Exhibition*), the most prestigious state-sponsored art competition in the Third Reich (discussed below).[32] This official inclusion is strong evidence of their representation of Nazi ideology. Indeed, two out of three of these paintings were, according to the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* database, bought by none other than Adolf Hitler.[33] Similarly, two out of the three artists who produced these paintings were added to the so-called "God-gifted list," a 36-page document assembled in September 1944 by Joseph Goebbels, that recognized key figures from the National Socialist cultural sphere.[34] These paintings and their artists were, therefore, among the clearest representations of National Socialist ideology.

**Environmentalism in Nazi Germany**

From its very beginning, environmental thought in Nazi Germany was profoundly reactionary.[35] It sought to transform almost all aspects of life that emerged during the "decadent" period of urban modernity under the Weimar Republic—a period the Nazis considered not only harmful to the environment, but also to the German population. As Moore and Roberts point out, environmentalism in Nazi Germany was, rather than one coherent idea, a set of often contradictory notions.[36] Indeed, many influential politicians and thinkers who greatly contributed to the formation of the Nazi "Green Wing" were eventually disowned by the Nazi leadership. Figures initially embraced but later disavowed by the Nazi system include Richard Walther Darré (Reich Minister of Food and Agriculture), Rudolf Hess (long-standing personal aide to Adolf Hitler), Ludwig Ferdinand Clauß (the racial phenomenologist), and Rudolf Steiner (an occult philosopher and poet).[37] Nevertheless, the purpose of this chapter is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the many contours and contradictions of ecological thought in the Third Reich, as this would require a whole separate thesis. Rather, this chapter

aims to highlight some of the central ideas of Nazi ecology and, drawing on the existing literature, to construct a genealogical account of their origins. To that end, this chapter also considers discussions of the reactionary aesthetics that contributed to the overlap between National Socialism and ecology.[38]

Environmentalism in Nazi Germany was deeply intertwined with anti-modernism. In the Nazi view, modern technology was a corrupting effect of 20th-century capitalism and a cause of environmental degradation. This anti-modernist ideology coexisted rather awkwardly with the massive modernization projects undertaken by the Nazi regime, suggesting a gap between official thinking and actual party policy.[39] Indeed, the anti-modernist notions initially so attractive to party leadership were soon dismissed or even directly silenced by the National Socialist Party when it pursued heavy industry or infrastructure projects.[40]

The *Völkisch* movement, an ethno-nationalist movement of the late 19th and early 20th century that was later absorbed by National Socialism, was especially influential in formulating anti-modernist ideas. As Staudemaier observes, the movement's core principle represented a pathological response to modernity.[41] Many of its members, the so-called *Wandervögels* (*Wandering Birds*), settled in the woods, where they formed small agrarian communities free from modern technology. One of these groups, citing Gandhi's critique of industrial society, went so far as to declare: "Machinery is the Ultimate Sin."[42] Similar ideas about modern technology were widely held among prominent intellectuals of the period. One of the most notable was the case of the influential German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who since the late 1920s actively opposed modern technology.[43] Heidegger joined the Nazi party in 1933 and believed that Hitler could usher in a new metaphysical era for Germany, one free from nihilism and modern technology.[44] Many of these ideas were propagated by Richard Walther Darré, the Reich's Agriculture Minister. A great supporter of the *Völkisch* movement, Darré continued to

write texts about modern technology destroying ancient forms of being even after the fall of the Third Reich.[45]

It has also been argued that Nazi anti-modernist aesthetics formed a bridge between National Socialist ideology and conservationism in the domain of urban planning.[46] Looking at the writings of botanist Walther Schoenichen, architect Paul Schultze-Naumburg, and Nazi Gauleiter Heinz Haake, Lekan argues that modernist architecture came to be viewed as causing "landscape disfigurement" and making the natural world look "ugly."[47] Maintaining the landscape's "core health" by using traditional construction materials and building in traditional vernacular styles, therefore, became the utmost priority of these theorists and many Nazi-aligned architects. These ideas became especially crucial as they later contributed to the notion of the landscape as a mirror to the image of the state.[48]

Within that same framework, the notion of ecology in Nazi Germany became increasingly anti-urban. Modern cities were not merely associated with environmental pollution, but also with bourgeois (supposedly "Jewish") factory owners and racial mixing, which the Nazis saw as a threat to their fantasy of a pure Aryan race.[49] These ideas about racial mixing in an urban environment can be traced back to the 19th-century German anthropologist Ludwig Woltmann.[50] Woltmann believed that while rural environments allowed people to be "one with nature" and true to the "Germanic" spirit, cities represented racial decline.[51] These ideas later re-emerged in the writings of perhaps the most active National Socialist theorist, Alfred Rosenberg, who argued that cities were fatal to the spirit of the German *Volk*.[52]

The anti-urbanism inherent in National Socialist notions of ecology had its origins in an aesthetic critique of the increasingly modernist architecture of the Weimar Republic. In Schultze-Naumburg's view, the geometric forms of modern architecture resembled a desert environment foreign to Northern Europe.[53] This supposed binary between the luscious green

(eco-friendly) German countryside and the urban desert was also patently anti-Semitic. Nazi racial theory associated the urban "desert" with a wandering (supposedly "Jewish") population, rootless (in their view) and unable to care for the environment.[54]

Agrarianism, specifically organic farming, was promoted by the Nazi party as a necessary alternative to a modern, urban, and polluting lifestyle. In fact, it was Richard Walther Darré who initially persuaded Hitler to seek the backing of farmers and peasants to secure more votes.[55] On the other hand, Darré's infamous use of the term *Blut und Boden* (*Blood and Soil*)—a phrase connoting a set of mythical ideas about the relationship between the *Volk* and the natural environment—was not entirely original. The term was actually an updated version of Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl's *Land und Leute* (*Land and People*), a 19th-century appeal for nature protectionism for the purposes of preserving German identity.[56] Darré was also inspired by the ideas of the Austrian esoteric philosopher Rudolf Steiner. Steiner, who promoted biodynamic farming, believed that "soil was a living organism" and saw "the peasant as a biological function of the body politic."[57] Steiner was thus a major inspiration for Darré's glorification of peasant life.[58]

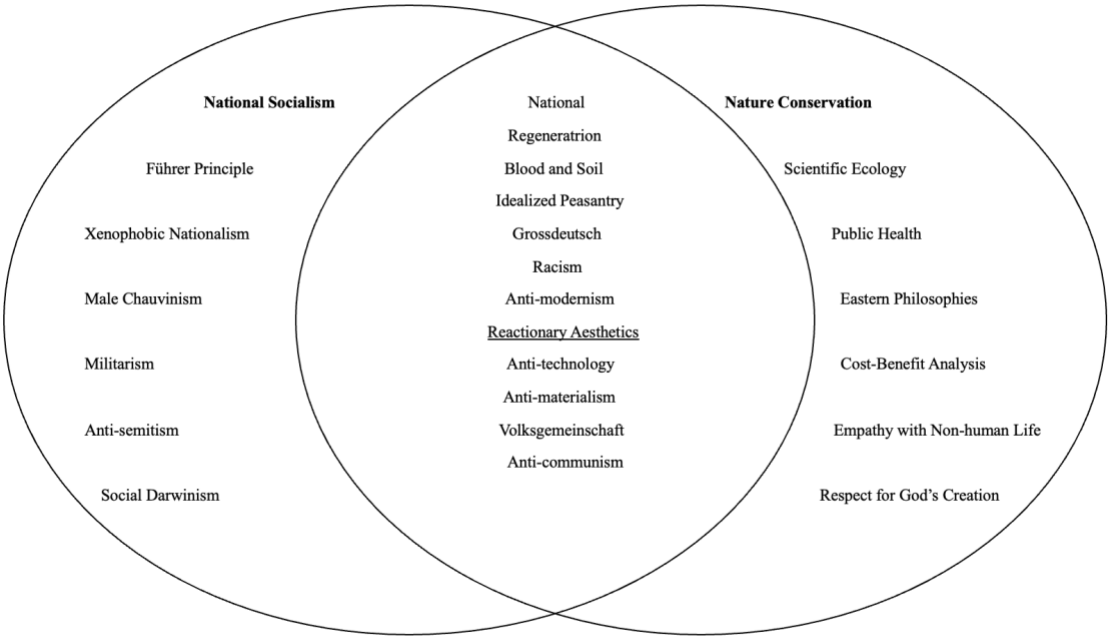


Figure 1. Ideological Overlap between Nature Conservation and National Socialism. Image from Raymond H. Dominick III, *The Environmental Movement in Germany: Prophets and Pioneers, 1871-1971*, 1993.[59]

The relationship between many of the ideas articulated in this section (as well as other concepts beyond the scope of this thesis) are helpfully summarized in Figure 1 above. Together, they formed the basis of what came to be a highly contradictory and destructive form of environmental politics. To further understand the intellectual foundation of Nazi environmental politics, this thesis turns, in the next section, to the development of reactionary aesthetics in Nazi Germany.

## National Socialist Philosophical Understanding of Art in Relation to Race and Environment

Standing in the middle of a Nazi art exhibition, one might wonder how seemingly apolitical, straightforward depictions of peasants working in a field or families enjoying a meal together came to acquire such profound political and ideological significance. To be able to answer this question, one does not (thankfully) need to possess knowledge of the whole history of aesthetics. On the contrary, as Tobin Siebers argues, Nazi aesthetics were based particularly on pseudo-scientific ideas about race and cannot be positioned within a broader history of general aesthetics.[60] Although Nazi leadership praised ancient Greek, Roman, and Romantic art, none of the aesthetic principles of these periods contained a notable racial component.[61] Nazi aesthetics were thus largely a rejection, rather than a continuation, of previous major currents of aesthetic thought.[62]

In 1932, Paul Schultze-Naumburg, a member of the *Völkisch* movement and Nazi art theorist, published his influential *Kampf um die Kunst* (*Struggle for Art*).[63] Schultze-Naumburg's ideas formed the basis of the Nazi conceptualization of art in increasingly moral, political, racial and ecological terms, and rejected the 19th-century French notion of *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake), which denied art's utilitarian function.[64] Largely ignored by most contemporary scholarship, *Kampf um die Kunst* was decisive in the conception of the Nazi *Degenerate Art Exhibition* (1937).[65] The work also represented a break from the aesthetics of classical German idealism, conceptualizing art as having a social role as a mirror of the people, rather than the expression of individual genius.[66] Emphasis on art's role in individual consciousness was thus replaced by Nazi aims for the German nation-state.[67] As Schultz-Naumburg argued:

> …[T]he higher task of the artist is to show the final objectives to the people of their time, to make visible the image towards which one wishes to move so that all people could recognize the beauty and can start the contest to imitate it and to make themselves compliant with that ideal.[67]

Instead of aiming to depict a moment, art under National Socialism sought to transcend time, and, as Hitler himself put it, become "eternal."[69] Seen as having the ability to usher in a new era, art was therefore not meant to ask questions, but rather to provide its viewers with answers.[70] Partly for this reason, art criticism was demonized, as it was considered inconsistent with politically homogeneous national thinking.[71] If art was not determined by individual genius or art criticism, what was its defining feature in the framework of Nazi aesthetics? Replacing traditional aesthetic criteria, Nazi ideology of art instead gave pride of place to the notion of race.

In 1928, a few years before the publication of *Kampf um die Kunst*, Paul Schultze-Naumburg published his perhaps most influential book, *Kunst und Rasse* (*Art and Race*).[72] As its title suggests, the book makes an argument about the inherent racial nature of art. By crudely misinterpreting European art history and important artworks from canonical figures such as Rembrandt and Michelangelo, Schultze-Naumburg argued that art can never escape the physical features of its creator, and is bound to artists' genetic material.[73] As Schultze-Naumburg himself claimed:

> Art, however, offers us instruction not only concerning the races that make up a people and, through a process of internal variation, more or less change its essential type; it also yields information concerning higher or lower instances within races or racial mixtures.[74]

As the passage suggests, Schultze-Naumburg believed that European modern art, full of the "downfallen, sick and the physically deformed," was a clear indicator of racial mixing and the demise of European civilization.[75] As Schultze-Naumburg would argue in his later book *Kampf um die Kunst*, only one race could contemplate the true "unitary essence" of art—the "Aryan"

race.[76] Art conceptualized in these racial terms was therefore unable to pursue a greater universal ideal for the whole of humanity.[77] The "beautiful" for the Nazis came to resemble "the healthy," and most importantly, the "Aryan."

Even dedicated racialists risked censure if they failed to conform to the Nazi doctrine that art was essentially a product of race, a point overlooked in Vollgraff's treatment of the case of Ludwig Ferdinand Clauß.[78] Clauß, another early 20th-century racialist, believed that race was a style constitutive of the human *Gestalt*.[79] Despite his clear identification as a racial theorist, Clauß became involved in a dispute in 1941 with Nazi politician Walter Groß over the former's belief that artworks could not portray this so-called racial style in its full form.[80] As a result of this dispute, Clauß was eventually fired from all of his academic positions and expelled from the Nazi party.[81]

How can these ideas about aesthetics and race inform us about the way Nazis conceptualized the environment? Environmental themes were already present in Schultze-Naumburg's work a decade earlier. In his 1916 publication, *Die Gestaltung der Landschaft durch den Menschen* (*Shaping of the Landscape by Humans*), Schultze-Naumburg advocates for nature preservationism and equates the idea of beauty with an unaltered German natural landscape free from the signs of modern technology.[82] These ideas about the environment took on a particularly racial edge in the previously discussed *Kunst und Rasse*, especially in the fourth chapter of that work on "The Impact of Race on our Environment." The chapter begins with the following premise:

> The connection between an artist as a racial individual and his artistic creation can only appear as an extremely visible similarity…but it would be unthinkable that the law of this inner connection would fail in other activities that shape our environment.[83]

Schultze-Naumburg uses the term "environment" in a broader sense according to which the natural environment is only one part of a larger whole. Nevertheless, the chapter clearly asserts

that the environment, like art, is an inevitable indicator of genetic material.[84] The chapter also makes a direct connection between racial mixing and visible environmental denigration.[85] By arguing that modern technology and its negative effects on the environment only benefit the "mentally and socially unfit," Schultze-Naumburg comes full circle to the anti-modernist themes explored in the beginning of this thesis.[86] This only further demonstrates this thesis' claim about the essential intersection of ideas that formed the basis of environmentalism and aesthetic ideology under National Socialism.

**The Production and Circulation of Art in Nazi Germany**

Under the Nazis, art gained an increasingly important place in German public life. Art was distributed through posters, postcards, and newly-established magazines such as *Der Kunstwart* (*The Guardian of Art*) and *Deutsche Kunstbericht* (*German Art Report*), the latter of which was directly inspired by the writings of Schultze-Naumburg.[87] Prices of tickets to theaters, museums, and opera houses were drastically reduced in order to attract more viewers.[88] The purpose of making art more widely available was clear: art was a tool for disseminating National Socialist ideology with a deceptively humane face.[89]

Before the National Socialist Party gained control over the German art world, three seminal movements flourished: German Expressionism, Bauhaus, and *Die Neue Sachlichkeit* (*The New Objectivity*).[90] These modernist movements were characterized by innovation and experimentation, engagement with the experience of modern industrial life, and critique of traditional social values.[91] Under National Socialism, these movements were denigrated and ultimately censored for their supposed ties to big cities, the bourgeoisie, and "Jewish" art dealers. Artworks from these and other international art movements of the time were mockingly displayed in the 1937 *Degenerate Art Exhibition* held in Munich and organized by the infamous Nazi painter Adolf Ziegler.[92] A striking 650 confiscated works associated with leading

modernist movements (including Dadaism, Expressionism, and Cubism) were viewed by more than 150,000 people in just a few months.[93] In the same year as the *Degenerate Art Exhibition*, just a stone's throw away in Munich, the inaugural edition of the Nazi-approved *Great German Art Exhibition* (*Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung*) also took place.[94] If the intention of the *Degenerate Art Exhibition* was to display art that the Nazis deemed representative of "cultural bolshevism" and "Jewish sedition," the intention of the *Great German Art Exhibition* was to display exceptionally good, "true German" art which aligned with National Socialist ideology.[95] Ironically, sometimes different works from the same German artists would end up at both exhibitions, suggesting a certain inconsistency in the application of Nazi racial thinking about art.[96] The three paintings examined in the next chapter of this thesis were all chosen to be presented at the *Great German Art Exhibition.*

The value of the *Great German Art Exhibition* was not only symbolic, but also financial. Already established masterpieces were often sold at the same price as new works by largely unknown artists,[97] suggesting the near-total collapse of the German art market under Nazi control. As many as 1,000 works were bought each year by Hitler, and received a highly prized label "Purchased by Führer."[98] Many previously unknown artists saw this as a career opportunity and started producing the type of art they thought would receive a green light from Nazi state sponsorship on a mass scale.[99] In this way, paintings emerged as direct products of the system and its driving ideology.

Due to the relative brevity of Nazi rule in Germany, however, a uniform style of Nazi painting never fully developed. As the artists elevated by Nazi state sponsorship came from a variety of previously established schools, the paintings presented in the *Great German Art Exhibition* varied in style from something reminiscent of The New Objectivity movement to outdated styles of the late 19th-century, though the content of the images remained limited to approved themes. The extent to which painters changed their work after the establishment of

the Third Reich also varied significantly. As Bouwhuis observed in an interview conducted for this thesis, while some artists produced openly propagandistic works, others would merely change the title of their paintings from (for example) "an oak tree" to a "German oak tree."[100] Even if artistic shifts were sometimes minimal, this thesis maintains that the meanings of artworks produced under Nazi state sponsorship were never "given" but always "taken." It was the context of National Socialism that provided specific meanings even to otherwise perhaps innocuous images (e.g., of oak trees). It is therefore less important to determine whether certain paintings represented National Socialist ideology in a vacuum than to ask what significance National Socialism attributed to such paintings when granting them patronage.

The visual content of much National Socialist art might not read as particularly political to most observers. The walls of the *Haus der Deutschen Kunst* (where the *Great German Art Exhibition* was held) were not, by and large, filled with portraits of the *Führer* and depictions of war. On the contrary, they mostly displayed depictions of nature and peasants. Artworks with human motifs were granted 3,643 entrances in the *Great German Art Exhibition*, followed closely by landscapes, which were granted 2,981 entrances.[101] These are highly elevated numbers compared to the merely 660 war-themed works and 342 depictions of political life included in the exhibition. In fact, depictions of war and political life were also surpassed by motifs of animals (1,284), mythology (425), and even plants (425).[102] Indeed, there were so many depictions of nature that, in 1943, the organizers of the *Great German Art Exhibition* actually received complaints from viewers who, instead of a "dubious flight into idyllicism," wanted to see more "contemporary history paintings about the war."[103] How did the representations of nature that so decisively dominated Nazi state-sponsored painting actually depict the environment?

**The Environment in Nazi State-Sponsored Painting**

The three paintings examined in this section all received considerable endorsement from the system of Nazi state sponsorship. Each painting represents a popular genre of Nazi state-sponsored art—peasant painting, family portraiture and the female nude, respectively. Comparable themes are therefore also found in other paintings belonging to those genres.

In the context of Nazi state sponsorship, the titles of artworks had considerable significance. In the context of public dissemination, titles were viewed as imparting a legible meaning to the work in question.[104] Analyzing titles of works is therefore essential when considering state-sponsored art from the National Socialist period. Similarly, the size of the work was often indicative of its intended public function. Larger works, as Bouwhuis explains in the interview, were made to decorate government buildings, emphasizing their overtly political use.[105] The sizes of works will therefore also be taken into account when conducting visual analysis.

**Subjugating the Soil: Julius Paul Junghanns' *Plowing* (1940)**

Julius Paul Junghanns' *Plowing* (Fig. 2) was displayed at the *Great German Art Exhibition* in 1940 and became a well-known symbol of National Socialist art.[106] Under the Nazi regime, the artist was appointed President of the Reich's Chamber of Fine Arts and was added to the God-gifted list in 1944.[107] His painting *Plowing* is representative of an important genre of Nazi state-sponsored painting in which the German *Völk* was portrayed at work, either in the forest or on the field. This was one of the most popular genres of Nazi state-sponsored painting, with many prominent artists—including Leopold Schmutzler, Werner Peiner, Oskar Martin-Amorbach—working almost exclusively within it.[108] Moreover, Junghanns' *Plowing* was bought by Hitler and widely distributed across the Third Reich in postcard form.[109] As Bouwhuis explained in the interview, the painting was so popular that a 1960's reproduction

of it still decorates many Dutch houses, with most people most likely unaware that the painting has a National Socialist origin.[110]

Figure 2. Julius Paul Junghanns, *Plowing*, 1940, oil on canvas (150 x 245 cm), Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, Germany.

Almost two and a half meters wide, *Plowing* was most likely intended to decorate a public or government building, signifying the profound political intention behind its sponsorship.[111] Rendered in an outdated late 19th-century style, the painting portrays an anonymous peasant working (or perhaps toiling) in the middle of a sun-drenched field. The equipment depicted is significantly outdated for the time in which the work was painted.[112] The Nazi ecological themes of anti-modernism and anti-urbanism are therefore also very much present in this painting. As Van Dyke argues, the scene is far removed from modern technologies and big urban centers where inequality prevailed, instead portraying an idyllic and romanticized German environment.[113]

More importantly, the painting carries a profound moral message. It valorizes the subjugation of the earth as man's ultimate goal.[114] Supposedly organic farming is depicted as almost "ceremonial" in its ritual significance,[115] very much in line with the ideas of Richard Walther Darré. The painting communicates a clear message to its viewer that "true Germanness" ultimately entails establishing dominion over the Earth through agrarian labor. *Plowing*, as the title suggests, describes an act of turning up the earth and leaving its mark on it. Furthermore, the peasant in the painting has no face; he is not portrayed as an individual, but rather as an anonymous, representative Aryan. In this way, any "true German" observer is provided with an option to identify themself with the farmer, further emphasizing the universality of the ideological principle conveyed. The ideas of "blood and soil" thus embody the spirit of Junghanns' *Plowing*, making it one of the clearest visual representations of Nazi ecology.

**Fields and Families: Adolf Wissel's *Peasant Family from Kalenberg* (1939)**

The rather striking painting by Adolf Wissel titled *Peasant Family from Kalenberg* (Fig. 3) was first entered in a Nazi-sponsored competition *Das Familienbild* (*The Family Portrait*) in 1938.[116] The competition was organized because the National Socialist Party leadership believed there were too many paintings depicting families with only two children, a family size they feared might lead to "the downfall of the German race."[117] In order to enter the competition, artists were officially required to submit paintings depicting at least four children. Wissel's painting did not depict four children, nor did it win (it tied in second place with another entry), but the painting nonetheless became one of the most discussed works from the Nazi era.[118] Indeed, the painting was presented the following year at the *Great German Art Exhibition*, and subsequently bought by Hitler.[119]

Figure 3. Adolf Wissel, *Peasant Family from Kalenberg*, 1939, oil on canvas (150 x 200 cm), Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, Germany.

The title is self-explanatory. The painting depicts six family members (peasants) from a small village (Kalenberg) in northern Germany. The enormous size of the painting again suggests that the painting was intended to be displayed in a public building. The way the figures are depicted in the painting is reminiscent of the style of The New Objectivity movement, which was widely popular before the Nazi rise to power.[120] Although intended to promote family life, *Peasant Family from Kalenberg* leaves its viewers with a profound feeling of alienation. The reason why the painting was so highly praised therefore remains something of a mystery.[121]

Its atmosphere of alienation notwithstanding, the painting provides its viewers with a visual guide of what a "pure Aryan" family should look like. As Bouwhuis pointed out, the portrayal of the human figure is precise, yet at the same time idealized, almost giving a sense

of artistic overachievement.[122] Arguably, this impression also derives from the fact that the painting aimed to depict something (perfect examples of a mythical Aryan race) that did not, in fact, exist. For this reason, as Griffin points out, painting, "a medium of almost endless possibilities," often served as a means of portraying imagined ideas the Nazis held about the world.[123]

Alongside its idealized racial element, Wissel's *Peasant Family from Kalenberg* contains several other ecological themes. A closer look reveals picturesque fields, meadows, and windmills lurking in the background. Aryans, considered indigenous to the German land, were also thought of as a race most capable of "taking care" of the environment.[124] The paintings' message is clear: the nature in the background is so well maintained because of the "pure Aryans" shown in the front. Schultze-Naumburg's concept of the inherent relationship between race, art, and the environment is thus also present. The idyllic background landscape is not only present in this particular painting, but also in many other family portraits by Hermann Otto Hoyer, Alfred Bernert, and other state-sponsored artists of the time.[125] Though varying in size and prominence, a lush landscape is almost always present in paintings of idealized German families, reminding the viewer of the inherent (supposed) relationship between the environment and the German nation.

Looking away from the well-maintained fields, the essential connection between humans and the environment in Wissel's *Peasant Family from Kalenberg* can also be seen in the ivy on the brick in the upper right-hand corner of the painting. In this case, nature seems to enter the personal space of the family more directly. During the Nazi era, human society and nature were conceived as having an organic unity, and the divide between social laws and natural laws was intentionally blurred.[126] In this sense, there were no separate categories of the social and the natural, as man and the nation were ultimately seen as bound to nature. The ivy

encroaching on the domestic scene in Wissel's painting serves as a pointed reminder of Nazi doctrine that natural elements are present in all human relations.

**Gendering Nature: Friedrich Wilhelm Kalb's *Pandora* (1943)**

Under National Socialism, female nudes became one of the main genres of German painting. While some modernist artists showed interest in depicting marginalized women such as sex workers, trans women, and women of color, the Nazis insisted on narrowly stereotypical portrayals of "healthy," cis-gender, voluptuous, and most importantly "pure Aryan" women.[127] The fact that these paintings primarily served the male gaze was indeed proven by the significant volume of letters artists received inquiring about the identity of the models depicted in their paintings, often following the publication of these works in magazines.[128] The women depicted in these paintings were most often positioned in a natural setting, alluding to mythical ideas of female goddesses and mother nature.[129]

A clear example of this genre is found in Friedrich Wilhelm Kalb's *Pandora* (Fig. 4), which was included in the *Great German Art Exhibition* and purchased by Friedrich Karl Florian, a regional Nazi leader.[130] This giant work, almost five square meters in size, was sold for the highest price of the three paintings taken as case studies in this thesis.[131] The work is characterized by a style of Romantic realism that draws heavily on classical models. The style was not just a personal choice of the artist, but carried a strong political connotation in the system of Nazi art sponsorship. As ancient Greece and Rome came to be considered among the "great early Aryan projects," incorporating values like racial purity, obedience and militarism, art inspired by the classical past were treated as clean of "all Jewish influence."[132]

Figure 4. Friedrich Wilhelm Kalb, *Pandora*, 1943, oil on panel (241.5 x 200 cm), private collection.

The name "Pandora" in Kalb's title clearly refers to the Greek mythological figure of Pandora, who was created out of earth, became the first woman, and was also a source of humanity's ills.[133] In Kalb's depiction, Pandora is imagined as a half-nude Aryan woman. The man to her right appears to hold a kind of flute (a symbol of culture), while the man to the left of her firmly holds an arrow, a hammer, and a pair of pliers (all symbols of power). While both men gaze at Pandora, she herself looks helplessly towards the viewer.

Kalb's *Pandora* reproduces two Western dualisms that have been long used to exert control over both women and nature,[134] and were also present in Nazi ideology. The first dualism portrayed by the painting conceptualizes the human as masculine and nature as

feminine. In a society where gender inequality prevails, this dualism has often been used to justify man's control over nature.[135] When women are considered inferior, associating them with nature also renders nature inferior to men. As Adam writes about Kalb's painting: "Where the man was shown as the ruler of nature, the woman was presented as nature itself."[136] The second dualism hinges on the division between nature and culture, and places women in the realm of the natural and passive, while men are seen as cultural and active.[137] In a society where this dualism prevails, men's achievements are often prioritized, while women may be viewed as redundant.[138] In this way, the domination of men over women is viewed as the only logical, perhaps even "natural" way of being.[139] Both dualisms complement each other, and are jointly destructive for both the biosphere and women.[140]

Drawing on these destructive dualisms, Kalb's *Pandora* reveals another important element of Nazi environmentalism: the Nazis' gendered view of the environment. Unfortunately, this aspect of Nazi environmental thought is often overlooked in discussions of National Socialist ecology. This is not surprising, as the dualisms identified were heavily used in National Socialist ideology as justifications for domination over specific groups of people and the natural environment.[141] Kalb's *Pandora* and its public dissemination made clear the Nazi endorsement of these dualisms, thereby allowing us to construct a more comprehensive view of the underlying ideological structures at work.

The six themes of Nazi environmental ideology identified in the above case studies—agrarianism, anti-modernism, anti-urbanism, racial purity, organicism and mythology—have partly been identified by previous political science studies on Nazi environmentalism that rely mainly on textual analysis. This seventh theme of gendered environmentalism in Kalb's *Pandora*, however, remains largely neglected in the existing scholarly literature on Nazi ecology. Building on the theory of political aesthetics and using visual analysis to show how

art serves as a means through which political systems communicate has therefore proven useful in furthering our understanding of Nazi environmentalism.

## Conclusion

By answering the question, *How were notions of ecology represented in Nazi state-sponsored painting?*, this thesis not only broadens a largely-neglected debate about visual fascism and the environment, but also enhances the current understanding of environmentalism in Nazi Germany within the field of political science.

This thesis demonstrates a closely symmetrical relationship between ideological principles in art and environmentalism under National Socialism. Six environmental themes of Nazi environmental thinking previously identified in the literature by means of textual analysis were submitted to further analysis in the context of Nazi state-sponsored painting. This is already an important finding, as it further substantiates the existing scholarly understanding of how reactionary Nazi aesthetics facilitated the close coordination between party ideology and nature conservation. By carefully conducting visual analysis and showing that another, seventh element—the gendered view of the environment—persisted in the National Socialist conception of ecology, this thesis further enhances the current scholarly understanding of Nazi environmentalism.

As this thesis showed, aesthetic principles, state-sponsored art, and environmentalism complemented each other in Nazi Germany. This finding is significant as it demonstrates that a thorough understanding of Nazi environmentalism requires an underlying understanding of Nazi aesthetics and state-sponsored art. Methodologically, this finding presents an opportunity for political scientists working in the area of Nazi environmentalism to broaden their use of theoretical principles and source materials beyond strictly textual analysis. This thesis proposes that careful visual analysis, alongside a thorough understanding of politics and aesthetics rooted

in textual analysis, should be more widely employed, yielding new data and helping us to construct more accurate political narratives.

Though innovative in its range of methods and materials, this thesis is also undeniably limited in scope. Three paintings, however representative of the genres popular under National Socialism, cannot definitively account for a complex system of environmental thought and visual representation. Additional case studies are therefore certainly needed to confirm and extend the work of this study. Such additional case studies could include comparisons of painting sponsored under National Socialism with state-aligned art in other periods of German history, in order to better control for the specific contributions of Nazi ideology. More broadly, additional study is needed for the many extant examples of Nazi state-sponsored art, which remains significantly undertheorized in relation to almost any other category of political art. A longer study might also consider comparing the relationship between art and environmental thinking in Nazi Germany with that of other 20th-century totalitarian regimes. Despite these limitations, this study nonetheless draws on established, well-articulated methodologies to extend existing scholarly understanding of a crucial aspect of Nazi environmental thinking, broadening the existing debate and opening up new areas of research in political science.

With ecofascism on the rise, having open discussions about the volatile nature of environmental politics has acquired new urgency. A similar political urgency arises with the concept of "beauty," which often operates on a principle of rejection—excluding disfavored styles or artistic choices—that, in the case of fascism, extends dangerously to rejecting forms of human life. By untangling the interrelated politics of aesthetics and politics of the environment in Nazi Germany, this thesis hopes to shed light on the destructive implications of ideological manipulations of aesthetics and ecology. Only by recognizing the full range of fascist politics, including its visual and environmental dimensions, can we succeed as a society

in halting the exclusionary—and often deadly—forms of fascist politics that are sweeping through the world once again.

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128. Bouwhuis, *Art in the Third Reich: Seduction & Distraction,* 108.

129. Bouwhuis, *Art in the Third Reich: Seduction & Distraction,* 100.

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136. Adam, *Art of the Third Reich*, 150.

137. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 10, 20.

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