

# Political Animals: Serengeti Shall Not Die and the Cultural Heritage of Mankind

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## ABSTRACT

Bernhard Grzimek's 1959 nature documentary, *Serengeti darf nicht sterben* (*Serengeti Shall Not Die*), has recently been the subject of intense scrutiny by environmental historians and film scholars, who have unmasked it as a projection of colonialist fantasies. Building on their work, this article draws attention to Grzimek's description of the East African steppes as a "cultural heritage of all mankind" and examines the visual tropes deployed to support this claim. In this way, the film emerges as an early illustration of a new form of planetary consciousness that would find other examples in orbital photography and in the language of international treaties.

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In September of 1959, the op-ed pages of the Federal Republic of Germany became the site of an unusual censorship debate that centered on an obscure government institution, the Filmbewertungsstelle Wiesbaden, nowadays known as the Deutsche Film- und Medienbewertung (FBW). The debate was unusual for two reasons. First, the film that had supposedly been the victim of undue government interference wasn't a crime shocker or sexually explicit thriller, but a nature documentary about wildlife conservation efforts in East Africa called *Serengeti darf nicht sterben* (*Serengeti Shall Not Die*). Second, the FBW does not actually have the power to censor movies in any traditional sense of the term. Its review process is strictly voluntary and aims only to establish whether a film possesses artistic or educational merit. The certificates awarded by the FBW convey significant tax benefits under German law, however, and Bernhard Grzimek, the film's producer and principal director, complained that the initial rejection of his case had prevented *Serengeti Shall Not Die* from achieving its widest possible release. He took special umbrage at the fact that the FBW had suggested he cut two short passages from his movie, and he proclaimed these suggestions

an insult to the memory of his late son Michael, who had died in an accident while working as the project's main cameraman and assistant director. Grzimek's protest received so much popular attention that the FBW not only reversed its initial decision but also abandoned the practice of recommending changes altogether.<sup>1</sup>

The Grzimek affair in many ways was a product of its historical circumstances. The manner in which the filmmaker framed his response to the experts in Wiesbaden, for instance, testifies to the emotionally charged intergenerational dynamics in Adenauer's Germany. More significantly, however, the verdict handed down by the FBW documents that a mere fourteen years after the horrors of Auschwitz had been revealed to the world, even African animals could find themselves on the front lines of debates about humanistic value judgments. The first of the two passages that the government experts recommended cutting shows a pride of lions feasting on a zebra while the narrator explains: "It is true that lions kill and devour peaceful animals, just as we do. But they do not kill each other, and there are no murderous wars amongst them. That is one of the differences between lions and us. The world would be better off if humans behaved like lions." The FBW objected to this final sentence. In the second sequence, the narrator presents what amounts to a summary argument for the entire movie:

These last remaining herds of African game are a cultural heritage (*kultureller Gemeinbesitz*) of all mankind, just like our cathedrals and ancient monuments: the Acropolis, St. Peter's, and the Louvre in Paris. Only a few centuries ago, the Roman temples were being wantonly torn down for the sake of building materials. If today any government of whatever political shade dared to pull down the Acropolis in Athens in order to build workers' flats, the whole civilized world would cry out furiously against such outrage. Similarly, no man—black or white—should ever be allowed to endanger the future of these last living cultural treasures of Africa. God made the earth subject to the will of man. But surely not so that he might completely destroy his creations!<sup>2</sup>

Here, the panel in Wiesbaden demanded that the "impermissible equation" (*unerlaubte Gleichsetzung*) between African game herds and European cultural monuments be removed.

*Serengeti Shall Not Die* achieved enormous critical and commercial success and became the first German film to win an Academy Award. Frequently rebroadcast on public television, it helped shape the Germans' perception of Africa for generations to come. It was also warmly received in the more than 60 countries in which it received international distribution, and Grzimek took special pride in the fact that the Tanzanian National Parks administration used his movie in outreach campaigns.<sup>3</sup> Popular interest in the movie began to wane only in the 1980s, as a consequence of

changing documentary aesthetics, the rise of commercial television, and Bernhard Grzimek's death in 1987. Academic interest in the movie, on the other hand, has recently spiked, after ecological historians discovered it as a prime illustration of the paternalistic assumptions that frequently bedevil even well-intentioned western interventions in African societies.<sup>4</sup> Film scholars have carried this critique further, pointing out how the camera work in *Serengeti Shall Not Die* draws on the conventions of military photography and Nazi cinema to assert control over a landscape even as it purports to merely describe it.<sup>5</sup>

These studies allow us to draw interesting connections between an influential cultural product of the Adenauer era and the colonial legacy of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But their approach is also strictly limited, because they interpret the visual and discursive strategies deployed in *Serengeti Shall Not Die* only as the continuation of established imperialist tropes. Thus, Grzimek's claims that the African steppes serve as a site of universal cultural value can simply be dismissed as modern-day versions of the old colonialist lies about "civilizing missions" and "native improvement." By contrast, my argument in the following pages will be that *Serengeti Shall Not Die* represents a totally new stage in what Mary Louise Pratt would call the "European project of planetary consciousness," i.e., in the larger endeavor to justify imperial ideology by connecting it to a comprehensive model of global order.<sup>6</sup> Whereas the early modern period conceived of our planet largely as an uncharted space waiting to be discovered, and the nineteenth century justified its colonial aggression through appeals to natural history and a supposed hierarchy of races, Grzimek, poised at the beginning of the Cold War, interprets the African landscape as a fragile piece of a collective heritage ostensibly belonging to "all mankind" but in reality carefully staged for a Western audience. The rhetorical strategies that he uses to achieve this end can productively be connected to those that accompanied other important developments of the early Cold War, such as the quest for an international legal order or the space race.

### **Biographical and Historical Background**

Bernhard Grzimek, who for more than thirty years was one of the most important environmentalists and television personalities in the Federal Republic of Germany, was born in 1909 and earned a doctoral degree in veterinary medicine from the University of Berlin in 1933.<sup>7</sup> He showed an early interest in the young discipline of behavioral science, but his 1936 *Habilitationsschrift* was rejected on the grounds of insufficient scientific merit. His real breakthrough in life came in 1940, when a mutual acquaintance put him in touch with Leni Riefenstahl, whom he subsequently assisted with some of the animal scenes in the movie *Tiefland* (*Lowlands*, 1954). On set in the Dolomites, the two nature lovers struck up a friendship, and Grzimek eagerly studied Riefenstahl's *oeuvre*. His rising fame as specialist for exotic animals

opened other doors as well, and during the war he received a comfortable posting as a veterinary officer in the Wehrmacht. At war's end, this comparatively harmless assignment, along with some strategic lies to the denazification commission, resulted in an appointment to the directorship of the Frankfurt Zoo.<sup>8</sup>

Part of Grzimek's fame in postwar Germany rested on his enormous success in this position, which he held until 1974. Under his leadership, the Frankfurt Zoo developed from a glorified bomb crater into one of the largest zoological institutes in Europe. Even greater acclaim, however, came to him as the host of his own radio show and, starting in 1956, of one of the Federal Republic's earliest television programs. *Ein Platz für Tiere* (*A Place for Animals*) ran for more than three decades and was enormously successful throughout its long life, at times reaching viewer figures in excess of 70 percent.<sup>9</sup> Grzimek also wrote more than thirty popular books, founded his own film and image production company, and headed his own NGO, the Zoologische Gesellschaft Frankfurt (ZGF).

When Grzimek first took to the ether, his radio shows had little larger purpose than to tide listeners through hard times with diverting animal stories. This changed in 1954, when the zoo director, together with his young son Michael, embarked on an expedition into the Belgian Congo, where they shot their first feature film. *Kein Platz für wilde Tiere* (*No Room for Wild Animals*, 1956) presented a passionate indictment of overpopulation, deforestation, and animal slaughter in the African colonies. It also met with enormous success both in Germany and abroad, earning its directors two Golden Bears at the 1956 Berlinale Film Festival. As a result of this acclaim, the Grzimeks received an invitation by the British colonial government of Tanganyika, the former German East Africa, to conduct wildlife surveys in Serengeti National Park, which had been established only five years earlier at the urging of the Fauna Preservation Society, sometimes also called the "Penitent Butchers' Society" because it was comprised largely of big game hunters.<sup>10</sup> Thus, *Serengeti Shall Not Die* was born.

In the late 1950s, East Africa was in a state of anticolonial unrest. Kenya was in the midst of the Mau-Mau Uprising, and Tanganyika would gain independence in 1961, renaming itself Tanzania three years later. In an attempt to forestall revolt, the British government had recently decided to parcel off the Eastern half of Serengeti National Park, an area that included the giant Ngorongoro Crater, and return it to the native Maasai as pasture land. The Grzimeks were asked to study the effects that such a transformation would have on the large population of ungulates—primarily wildebeest, zebras, and Thomson's gazelles—that roamed the plains. To conduct this unprecedented survey, the Grzimeks pioneered the use of light aircraft in the observation of animal herds, and their movie has justly been acclaimed for the breathtaking shots made from their iconic zebra-striped Dornier DO-27. It was this airplane, too, in which twenty-five year old Michael fatally crashed after colliding with a vulture.

Badly shaken but undeterred by his son's death, the elder Grzimek returned to

Germany with an alarming message: the Serengeti plains, so he claimed, were already home to only about a third of the one million animals that traditional estimates had assigned them, and those populations were likely to plummet further if the proposed changes to the park boundaries went into effect. Contemporary ecologists and wildlife historians largely agree that many of Grzimek's conclusions were erroneous and that he may even have falsified data in order to make it conform to his views about nature conservation.<sup>11</sup> These views were already concisely expressed by the title of his earlier film, *No Room for Wild Animals*, and can be summarized with three propositions: (1) wildlife and humans can thrive only in strictly separated spaces; (2) human populations that *do* coexist with wild animals, such as the Mbuti ("Pygmies") in Central Africa, are able to do so only because they are essentially part of the fauna themselves; and (3) overpopulation, modernization and racial intermixing will, if unchecked, rapidly crowd out animals while simultaneously destroying the customs of the last "authentic" African communities.<sup>12</sup>

Applying these principles to the Serengeti, Grzimek demanded that all Maasai be expelled from the National Park and that the Ngorongoro Crater remain a part of the protected area. The Tanganyikan colonial administration never seriously considered Grzimek's demands and, in fact, went ahead with the proposed redistricting before the Germans had finished their work in the Serengeti. The plains to the north of the original boundaries were added to the national park, while the Ngorongoro Crater and the adjoining highlands were turned into the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, which was henceforth to be shared by the Maasai, their cattle, and the wild animals. While this solution alleviated some of the immediate political pressures, its long-term effects have been disastrous, not the least because it effectively disenfranchised the Maasai, preventing them from having any further input into the future of the national park, which in the following decades developed into the main revenue source in western Tanzania.

### Reframing the Serengeti

While the immediate impact of the two Germans' population study on the administration of Serengeti National Park was thus negligible, the movie that they produced, along with Bernhard Grzimek's tireless advocacy over the following decades, would profoundly transform both landscape and society in East Africa. Bernhard Grzimek has rightly been called one of the founders of modern nature tourism, and the number of foreign visitors to Tanganyika/Tanzania shot from four hundred in 1956 to fifty-two thousand in 1972.<sup>13</sup> Many of these new arrivals were tourists in search of the unspoiled landscapes on display in *Serengeti Shall Not Die*. Grzimek took more direct action as well, seeking to influence Tanzanian policy through his friendships with high-ranking officials in the national park system as well as with the country's long-serving president, Julius Nyerere.<sup>14</sup>

The reinvention of natural sites (including ones with a long record of human habitation) as “wild” or “pristine” sources of aesthetic enjoyment is hardly original to Grzimek, of course, and has a bureaucratic prehistory that reaches at least as far back as the inauguration of Yellowstone as the world’s first national park in 1872. Grzimek innovated on this tradition, however, by labeling the Serengeti a cultural heritage site and deliberately and strategically seeking protection for it in the name of “all mankind” rather than in the name of a nationally, ethnically, or economically individuated community. This rhetorical move was almost certainly responsible for the attempts of the Filmbewertungsstelle Wiesbaden to influence Grzimek’s movie. As Francisca Torma has shown, the FBW, like many other West German institutions of the early 1950s, was under the programmatic influence of the “Occidental Movement” (*Abendlandbewegung*), a conservative current within German intellectual life that viewed a return to the twin pillars of Greco-Roman humanism and Catholic universalism as the only possible means to prevent future outbreaks of totalitarian terror.<sup>15</sup> Grzimek ran afoul of this movement because he dared to equate African megafauna with such potent symbols as the Acropolis or St. Peter’s Cathedral and thereby also suggested that humanistic renewal might require a global rather than primarily European outlook.

While the conceptual audacity of this suggestion is praiseworthy, its actual implementation within the filmic structure of *Serengeti Shall Not Die* is considerably more ambivalent. Consider the following two examples, the first verbal and the second visual in nature. One of the most distinctive characteristics of Grzimek’s documentary is his repeated description of large animal herds as “armies” or “marching columns.” These metaphors find a powerful culmination in the film’s subtitle, “367.000 Tiere suchen einen Staat” (*367,000 Animals in Search of a State*). In a clear allusion not only to the postcolonial independence struggles of the late 1950s but also to the many displaced peoples who found themselves without a home to return to after World War II, Grzimek is here implying a direct relationship between African animals and the challenges confronting European humanism in the shadow of the Holocaust. The flipside of such metaphors, however, is that they draw affective attention away from the actual independence struggles that were waged by various ethnic groups in close proximity to the Serengeti steppes. Indeed, they work to counteract them; for as Grzimek also made clear on various occasions, he regarded African nationalism as one of the biggest threats to the Tanzanian national park system through which the metaphor of an “animal state” might potentially become reality.<sup>16</sup>

On a visual level, the ambivalence of Grzimek’s attempts to reframe the Serengeti as an endangered landscape in need of humanist intervention can be most clearly seen in the many aerial shots by which the German filmmaker hoped to generate interest in and affection for the animals of the Serengeti. As a zookeeper and television personality, Grzimek was well familiar with, and eagerly exploited, the spontaneous

emotional bonds that residents of industrial nations will form with exotic animals. He also knew Walt Disney's *The Living Desert* (1953), which had broken with the tradition of the "safari films" (in which animals inevitably figured as threats) and transferred these affective energies to the big screen. But despite the fact that it features traditional close-ups, as well as anthropomorphizing narration, *Serengeti Shall Not Die* is ultimately not a movie about individual animals. Grzimek knew that the fauna of the East African plains could not be rescued one creature at a time. Only if his viewers came to appreciate entire herds as natural treasures, and thus as assets worth fighting for, could the Serengeti be saved.

Aerial filmography provided Grzimek with a solution to this problem, for it allowed him to show large quantities of animals in dramatic and beautifully composed shots never before seen on movie screens. *Serengeti Shall Not Die* contains several expensive special-effects sequences in which the Grzimeks demonstrate their pioneering method of dividing the Serengeti into narrow strips that were then traced by airplane in order to ensure an accurate animal count. It also features breathtaking sequences shot from within the cockpit that give aerial views of the stampeding herds and document how the park rangers assisting the Grzimeks track population figures through hash marks on notepads. The viewer thus participates in a quite literal fashion in the "discovery" of the East African herds as a previously invisible conceptual entity.

The problem with such shots, of course, is that they overtly invoke a well-defined tradition of what Mary Louise Pratt would call the "imperial gaze," i.e., a way of looking that aims to take possession of a landscape even as it purports to merely describe it. This connection becomes apparent in one of the most notorious sequences in the movie, in which the two Germans join a squad of British park rangers in a raid against indigenous poachers. This raid is crucial to the movie's overall message, because it underscores Grzimek's contention that without radical intervention the Serengeti will soon be depleted of its natural wonders. The sequence devoted to it is consequently the most action-packed in the entire film: the Grzimeks first perform several mock strafing runs against the poachers—who futilely return fire with poisoned arrows—and then summon their British allies by tossing a smoke bomb, the explosion of which is filmed with a rear-facing camera whose perspective resembles that employed in World War II-era battle photography. The scene is accompanied by music that sounds as though it had been taken directly from a Nazi-era newsreel. The Grzimeks here clearly attempt to frame the poachers as targets that need to be destroyed if the Serengeti is to thrive, rather than as a human community that deserves an active voice in deliberations about the future of the surrounding landscape. This strategy is made even clearer in the book version of *Serengeti Shall Not Die*, where Michael Grzimek exclaims, "I'd like to have a machine-gun that fired through the propeller" (160/181) immediately before descending upon the poachers. While such a gun was obviously not available, Vinzenz Hediger has pointed out that the Grzimeks frequently mounted their camera





Figure 1. The “bomb camera” perspective in *Serengeti Shall Not Die*.

in a similar position and thereby allowed viewers to participate in the sense of scopic control conferred by the act of flying.<sup>17</sup>

The scene with the poachers can be directly compared to one of the sequences devoted to the Grzimeks’ aerial population surveys, which also features low-altitude flyovers and a rear-facing camera. In this sequence, the Grzimeks pull their plane upward to record how scattering wildebeest form a star-shaped halo around the Dornier’s tailfin.

It is a moment of striking visual beauty but also, when juxtaposed with the later sequence of poachers running away from the smoke bomb, of troubling ideological implications. The juxtaposition suggests that the native Tanzanians are ultimately much like the wild animals, and that both groups can be counted, surveyed, and administered by the Europeans with their supposedly superior understanding of the African ecosystem.<sup>18</sup>

Grzimek’s attempts to reframe the Serengeti—to disconnect it from the political struggles raging all around it and reinvent it as a pristine site of nature beauty—thus both visually and discursively draw on established imperialist tropes. In both book and film, Grzimek willfully ignored the long history of human-animal interactions that linked the indigenous population to the fauna around them. As contemporary ecologists have pointed out, the Serengeti, far from being a “pristine” natural landscape, is in reality a product of thousands of years of human influence, of which the systematic burnings with which the Maasai clear brush for their cattle provide only the most overt example.<sup>19</sup> For Grzimek, on the other hand, the East African steppes possessed value only to the extent that they had previously been emptied of their human inhabitants, whose own forms of cultural production and historical consciousness needed to be subordinated to his larger ecological agenda. Needless to say, one of the most important particulars of the historical consciousness suppressed in this way was the memory of the roughly thirty years that Tanganyika had spent under German colonial administration as part of German East Africa.

### Producing Natural Heritage

The two examples discussed in the previous section demonstrate the extent to which Grzimek’s nature advocacy continued a long legacy of colonialist practices, but they



do not yet adequately document the German filmmaker's most important achievement—namely, his contributions to a new form of planetary consciousness via the conceptual category of “natural heritage.” The process by which one form of planetary consciousness gives way to another one can be observed in another famous sequence from *Serengeti Shall Not Die*, in which Michael Grzimek stumbles upon the ruins of an abandoned German border fortress which his father's voice-over narration immediately and implausibly compares to a picturesque castle on the Rhine. The appeal to medieval history as a way of contextualizing quite recent acts of violence is part and parcel of an old and familiar strategy of imperial legitimation. By stressing the Rhine castle's aesthetic appeal, however, and by praising the transformative experiences that German soldiers no doubt underwent during their long sojourn with the African animals, Grzimek signals his shift to a new way of thinking that directly links the Serengeti plains to established discourses concerning the edifying value of cultural heritage sites.

The concept of a supranational cultural heritage had first been formulated in the aftermath of the French Revolution, but had only recently, after the First World War, acquired its first tentative forms of legal codification.<sup>20</sup> The modern system of a “world heritage” protected by an international and universally recognized legal regime was still another thirteen years in the future and came about in large part because of processes that were set into motion concurrently with Grzimek's Tanzanian expedition and are briefly alluded to in the book that accompanied it. In 1954, shortly after seizing power in Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser announced ambitious plans to modernize his country by constructing a giant dam across the Nile near the city of Aswan. The project caused an immediate global outcry because the resulting lake would flood several sites of outstanding historical value, most importantly the Great Temple of Ramses II at Abu Simbel. The result of this controversy was that UNESCO commenced an ambitious rescue operation in 1960, relocating the temple structures to higher ground.<sup>21</sup>

In much the same way in which animal conservation in the Serengeti did not become an issue until the Tanzanian independence struggle, when black Africans demanded control over a landscape that the colonists had for the longest times used unquestioningly as hunting grounds, the threatened destruction of cultural patrimony in the Nile Valley sparked a massive outcry in the West only after Egypt gained its independence and embarked on a massive modernization campaign to secure its stability as a nation. The ultimate outcome of this turmoil was the ratification of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, which somewhat ambiguously states that: “Whilst fully respecting the sovereignty of the States on whose territory the cultural and natural heritage . . . is situated, . . . the States Parties to this Convention recognize that such heritage constitutes a world heritage for whose protection it is the duty of the international community as a whole to co-operate.”<sup>22</sup> Even as it asserts the sovereignty

of its member states, in other words, the Heritage Convention nevertheless reminds those states that their stewardship of cultural objects also implicates them in an international network of legal duties that might easily conflict with national interests.

Cultural heritage isn't something that can simply be declared by fiat, however, especially if the objects that are to be so elevated are as unconventional as the animal herds of the Serengeti. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has explained, heritage is instead something that must be constructed by means of a dual process of display and spatial authentication: heritage sites must become "destinations" that promise an experience "more real, more immediate, or more complete" than would be available through mere surrogates.<sup>23</sup> The aerial shots analyzed in the last section go a long way toward explaining the strategies by which Grzimek turned animal herds into a form of display, but they do not adequately explain the process by which the Serengeti itself became a heritage site—at once a symbol of pristine wilderness and a screen onto which audiences the world over could project fantasies of a deepened experience of their collective humanity. For unlike previous examples of natural landscape subjected to collective heritage fantasies—like the Black Forest and the Harz mountain range, which play such an important role in the ideology of German romanticism—the Serengeti acquired a special significance in the eyes of the world only after it had been methodically separated from the cultural traditions of any indigenous community that might make a claim to it. How, then, could it be turned into a destination? And through what visual strategies could it become a guarantor of real and immediate experience?

Grzimek's complex answer to this question can most easily be explored through the opening sequence of *Serengeti Shall Not Die*, which quite literally turns the Serengeti into a destination by documenting the two filmmakers' journey south from their home airport near Frankfurt to an improvised runway in the national park. The sequence contains several elements that establish western technocratic mastery, most overtly perhaps in the elaborate trick sequences in which a moving iconographic representation of the zebra-striped DO-27 is projected onto a map of northern Africa in a manner reminiscent of Hollywood adventure films or colonial military campaigns. Repeated shots of the airplane's shadow gliding across the landscape below, a detail that Grzimek almost certainly borrowed from Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), add to the sense of scopic control. But these elements are juxtaposed with others that have a very different rhetorical effect. In these other shots, all visual references to the airplane are eliminated, and natural scenery instead takes up the entire frame. In contrast to traditionally framed "picturesque" views of nature, however, the landscape that is on display here appears to be vast and featureless; often, the horizon is either eliminated entirely or otherwise blends into the scenery, so that it becomes difficult even to tell up from down.

The first four minutes of *Serengeti Shall Not Die* feature three extended sequences

of this kind. In the first, the camera shows the snow-covered peaks of an Alpine landscape while Grzimek explains that “In such a tiny plane one doesn’t glide high above the clouds as one does in a passenger jet. Instead, one sees something of the earth, just like a migratory bird.” The phrase “one sees something of the earth” (*man sieht etwas von der Erde*) is an obvious variant of the German idiomatic expression “to see something of the world” (*etwas von der Welt sehen*) and connects the accompanying visual material to the larger discursive history of cosmopolitan adventure. Grzimek’s subtle variation of the phrase, however, draws attention to the material substrate of such imaginative projections, the physical “planet” that underlies the conceptual invention of any “world.” By flying in a small plane, so the narration explicitly suggests, we become like migratory birds, attuned to the landscape in a way unlike that ordinarily available to human beings.

The second sequence renders this transformation more explicit. It begins with a visually conventional passage in which the Grzimeks initiate a landing sequence in the East African steppes. Just as the plane’s wheels are about to touch ground, there is an inexplicable cut to a high-altitude shot of the Serengeti, which appears as a nearly featureless expanse broken only by the black shapes of what are presumably smaller bodies of water surrounding Lake Victoria. Immediately following this cut, we hear Bernhard Grzimek say: “Our destination is a landscape that we love: the Serengeti.” The Tanzanian national park thus emerges as the most fitting subject of what we can now literally call a “bird’s-eye perspective”—a zoomorphic view of a natural landscape in which familiar landmarks are transformed into arabesques, rather than a measuring, calculating imperial gaze over an unclaimed colonial territory.<sup>24</sup>

This zoomorphic perspective is solidified in the third sequence, which unfolds to the tunes of stirringly romantic music as the opening credits roll. The Grzimeks here make use of their plane’s ability to fly at extremely low speeds as they soar over an East African salt marsh while thousands of flamingos take to the air all around them. The DO-27 seems to physically transform itself into a member of this flock, and because we can also no longer hear the propeller, the illusion is one of disembodied weightlessness. For any viewer familiar with the sad circumstances that brought the filming of *Serengeti Shall Not Die* to a premature end (and Bernhard Grzimek broadly publicized

the circumstances of his son’s death in order to stir up interest in his movie), this sequence would have gained added poignancy by the superimposition of the first credits to follow the title card: “A film by Michael Grzimek, who



Figure 2. Zoomorphic vision in *Serengeti Shall Not Die*.

suffered a fatal accident during this research project, and Dr. Bernhard Grzimek.”<sup>25</sup> Given that Michael died during a similar maneuver—when he, too, slowed down to extremely slow speeds and subsequently collided with a vulture—the movie thus in a very real sense seems to suggest that we are privy to the beatific vision of a dead man.

Taken together, these three sequences outline a discursive strategy that actively competes with the tropes of colonial surveillance that have received so much prior attention and establishes a new way of conceptualizing the Serengeti. This strategy can be summed up with three main points, namely (1) that it is desirable, and indeed necessary, to gain an alternative perspective on the world, one that would recognize it as an ecological entity rather than as the site of cartographic, administrative, or commercial interventions. (2) That this alternative perspective is linked to the visual tradition of the sublime, in which a featureless landscape erases not only any sense of Self but also the conceptual categories by which we ordinarily impose structure upon our physical surroundings. (3) That mastery over this sublime landscape can ultimately be achieved only from the perspective of a disincarnated subject, such as that of the dead cameraman Michael Grzimek. Taken together, these points support Bernhard Grzimek’s two main claims throughout *Serengeti Shall Not Die*: first, that the value of the East African landscape should be measured in cultural and aesthetic terms rather than in material and economic ones; and second, that this landscape constitutes a cultural possession (or heritage) of an abstracted “mankind” rather than of specifically situated peoples.

There are several sequences later in the movie that also highlight this characteristic visual rhetoric, of which I will here analyze only one. It occurs when the Grzimeks fly into the Ngorongoro Crater for the first time. The passage opens with one of the many shots in which a camera lines up with the axis of the plane and thus with the direction of flight, a perspective that I have earlier associated with attempts to establish scopic control and assert a belligerent colonial message. The Grzimeks fly directly toward the outside rim of the crater, rising gently as they do so and thereby (no doubt unconsciously) visually imitating the ascent to a tropical mountaintop that forms the centerpiece of so many pieces of imperial travel writing.<sup>26</sup> Once the Germans pass the rim of the crater, however, this visual rhetoric suddenly changes. The landscape inside the Ngorongoro again presents itself as vast and featureless, its tan expanse broken only by cloud shadows. Unlike the Dornier’s shadow, which the Grzimeks earlier showed moving rapidly across the terrain, these cloud formations are absolutely motionless; the plane also seems to have come to a standstill, an effect that undermines the earlier aggressive momentum of the sequence. As soon as the viewer has taken in this sublime vista, there is a cut to a different yet equally awe-inspiring view of the Ngorongoro. The camera, now presumably mounted on a tripod, pans sideways across a landscape in which earth and sky seem to blend into one another, while the narrator proclaims that “The Ngorongoro Crater is the largest

zoological garden in the world. God created it for his pleasure and surrounded it with walls made of mountains that rise to a height of 2,000 feet.” Critics of *Serengeti Shall Not Die* have frequently cited the first of these two sentences as confirmation of the fact that Grzimek was unable to view the African steppes as a landscape shared by humans and animals. The second sentence, however, deserves just as much attention, for the reflexive construction “*Gott hat ihn sich geschaffen*” again suggests that only a disincarnated subject position could come to grips with all that the Serengeti has to offer.

In this context it is also interesting to note that Bernhard Grzimek buried his son on the inside rim of the Ngorongoro, in a spot where his grave marker would overlook the landscape below. The grave, which now also holds the elder Grzimek’s remains, has become a minor pilgrimage site, once again demonstrating that the concept of natural heritage comes into being through a process of exhibition on the one hand and through a rhetoric of disincarnation on the other. The tour groups who visit Michael Grzimek’s final resting place are rewarded not only with material confirmation that they have walked on the actual ground that the two German filmmakers made famous; in gazing at the Ngorongoro Crater they can also briefly succumb to the illusion that they are experiencing nature not as members of particular ethnic, linguistic, or economic groupings but as representatives of the pure humanity symbolized by Michael’s ostensible martyrdom.

### **Orbital Perspectives**

As this analysis of Bernhard Grzimek’s filmic rhetoric suggests, his claims on the Serengeti as a “cultural heritage of all mankind” were not lightly made. Implicit in this assertion is a rejection, first of all, of all competing approaches that would view the East African steppes as a material resource or a political territory in the ordinary sense of the word. Subsequent to this, Grzimek advanced the even more radical claim that the Serengeti has the power to reveal for us a new perspective on the world, one in which we come to recognize ourselves not as part of any particular subset of humanity but rather as representatives of an abstracted “mankind” in its entirety. Critics of *Serengeti Shall Not Die* have rightly pointed out that Grzimek’s colonialist prejudices, as well as his membership in the Nazi party, render such attitudes hypocritical. But they fail to acknowledge that the visual tropes that the German filmmaker uses to advance his claims can also be found in other, and more influential, discourse formations of the immediate postwar era. Foremost among these is orbital photography, another new way of looking at the world that came about as a consequence of the space race. Like Grzimek’s work in the Serengeti, the space race was an inherently imperial scramble which, even as it promised to open up a new chapter in the history of mankind, remained deeply imbricated in the technology and rhetoric of older struggles for domination.



Figure 3. V-2 vistas. Image courtesy of White Sands Missile Range/Naval Research Laboratory.

unmanned balloons and, starting in 1946, to capture V-2 rockets at White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico. These new photographs documented the curvature of the earth and were taken from so high up that even the largest geological formations were rendered strangely unrecognizable.<sup>28</sup> In much the same way in which the Grzimeks' ascent to the Ngorongoro caldera resulted in a sudden visual shift from a perspective of control to one of disincarnation, the US Army thus found that pictorial technologies originally developed for purposes of military surveillance tipped over into visual defamiliarization at the precise moment that they also attained what we might call a "planetary" perspective.

From a purely visual point of view, the space race culminated in one of the most famous photographs of all time, the "Earthrise" image taken by William Anders during the Apollo 8 mission in December 1968. "Earthrise," like all the other images taken during the Apollo missions, forms part of the pictorial history of twentieth-century imperialism. The race to the moon served a clear strategic goal during the Cold War struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. "Earthrise" is a document of military dominance: it displays the entire earth as an object of interpellation, mastery, and potential destruction. But this is not the way in which it is commonly read. Instead, "Earthrise," together with the equally famous "Blue Marble" photograph of 1972, is almost always interpreted as the icon of a new age of global solidarity and ecological consciousness, the first-ever image to truly speak to, as well as for, "all of mankind."

The story of how a photograph came to acquire such an enormous emotional resonance is complex and has spawned an extensive secondary literature.<sup>29</sup> But part of the story surely has to do with the fact that "Earthrise," too, promulgates a disincarnated subject position. Taken from lunar orbit, and thus from outside any coordinate system that would meaningfully structure spatial relationships on Earth itself, the image

The prehistory of orbital photography stretches back to the 1920s and 1930s, when aerial pioneers competed for altitude records in fixed-wing aircraft. The photos that these pilots returned from their adventures were impressive but took a ready place in the pictorial tradition established by military photography during the First World War.<sup>27</sup> This changed when the US Army began strapping cameras to



seemingly addresses itself in equal measure to all residents of the planet. Simultaneously, the sliver of lunar rock in the foreground reminds us that this is, properly speaking, an impossible subject position and that no human, not even the Apollo 8 astronauts, could claim this perspective as “theirs.” Read against the background of the nuclear arms race, the same barren rocks might also be taken as a potent reminder that the only real form of equality to be found across the globe was the one encoded in the doctrine of mutually assured



Figure 4. “Earthrise.” Image courtesy of NASA.

destruction. The political relevancy of “Earthrise,” therefore, resides in the fact that it proposes something like an Archimedean point: a purely imaginary place from which it nevertheless becomes possible to view the world (a world divided by political, economic, and military strife) in a new light—namely, as a shared and unified planet.

Needless to say, Bernhard Grzimek’s visual experiments in *Serengeti Shall Not Die* were far less radical. But it is interesting to note that the concept of a common heritage of mankind, which Grzimek introduced in his movie and so daringly intertwined with the established concept of cultural patrimony, acquired its first legal force long before the 1972 World Heritage Convention in a series of legal treaties designed to codify and protect spaces exactly like the one that I have just described: the Antarctic Treaty of 1959, the Outer Space Treaty of 1967, and the 1970 United Nations Declaration of Principles Governing the Seabed and Ocean Floor. All three of these treaties respond to the history of rapidly accelerating land grabs during the Cold War (markers of which would include the establishment of the first permanent Antarctic research station in 1947, the launch of Sputnik in 1957, and the beginning of deep-sea drilling in 1961) by declaring certain parts of the globe to be subject exclusively to international law, understood here not as a treaty system governing interstate conduct, but rather as an alternative legal regime that actively competes with established judicial discourses grounded in the concept of national sovereignty.



## Conclusion

In 2009, *Serengeti Shall Not Die* briefly returned to national newspapers when the Technical Museum in Berlin accessioned the wreck of the airplane in which Michael Grzimek had met his death and decided to display it alongside the Cessna that Matthias Rust had piloted on his surreptitious flight to Moscow in May of 1987.<sup>30</sup> Upon first sight, the two pilots seem united only by their stubborn idealism, which in both cases was heightened to the point of martyrdom in the eyes of the German audience that celebrated them. Only if we look closer does it become apparent that Michael Grzimek's breathtaking camera work in the *Serengeti* marks the beginning not only of a new visual regime but also of a new kind of planetary consciousness, which directly informed the global surveillance apparatus that Matthias Rust so deftly subverted.

From our perch in the twenty-first century, the Grzimeks and their work on behalf of the *Serengeti* may well seem anachronistic, a manifestation of an Adenauer-era mindset no longer relevant to our present condition. However, the disincarnated subject position that they sought to represent in their movie, as well as the rhetorical appeal to "all of mankind," are still very much with us—not only in such complex heritage controversies as the one currently surrounding the Elbe Valley near Dresden but also every time we see the "Blue Marble" photograph in print or television, or every time we open Google Earth. These images of Earth taken from space (whether real or virtually generated) have become universally recognizable ciphers of global solidarity and environmental responsibility. Their conceptual prehistory is less often examined, as is the fact that the products and discourse formations that make use of them almost universally originate in the western world.<sup>31</sup> To uncover this prehistory, which—as I have tried to show in this article—reaches not only deep into the Cold War but also beyond into Nazi cinema and colonial visual tropes, is one of the most vital challenges facing cultural criticism today.

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## Notes

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1. For a detailed overview of this dispute, see Franziska Torma, *Eine Naturschutzkampagne in der Ära Adenauer: Bernhard Grzimeks Afrikafilme in den Medien der 50er Jahre* (Munich: Martin Meidenbauer, 2004), 165–75.
2. Throughout this essay, I have made slight changes to the English dubbing to bring it in line with the original German. The dubbing introduces multiple changes which suggest that Grzimek was not entirely immune to the criticism of the FBW after all. In the passage about the lions, the English version omits the crucial final sentence, while in the cultural heritage passage it substitutes the pyramids for the Acropolis and St. Paul's for St. Peter's.
3. Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife on Film* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 197.

4. See e.g. Jan Bender Shetler, *Imagining Serengeti: A History of Landscape Memory in Tanzania from Earliest Times to the Present* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2007), 1–28, as well as Michael Flitner, “Inszenierte Natur, postkoloniale Erinnerung: *Serengeti darf nicht sterben*,” in *Themenorte*, eds. Michael Flitner and Julia Lossau (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2006), 107–24.
5. Vinzenz Hediger, “Das Tier auf unserer Seite: Zur Politik des Filmtiers am Beispiel von *Serengeti darf nicht sterben*,” in *Politische Zoologie*, eds. Anne von der Heiden and Joseph Vogl (Berlin: Diaphanes, 2007), 287–301.
6. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 29.
7. For biographical information on Bernhard Grzimek I am indebted to Claudia Sewig, *Bernhard Grzimek: Der Mann, der die Tiere liebte* (Bergisch Gladbach: Lübbe Verlag, 2009). Grzimek’s autobiography, originally published as *Auf den Mensch gekommen: Erfahrungen mit Leuten* (Munich: C. Bertelsmann, 1974) and recently reissued as *Mein Leben: Erinnerungen des Tierforschers* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 2009), is a colorful testament to the outsized personality of its author but of questionable documentary value. As Sewig shows, Grzimek not only exaggerated his own accomplishments but also repeatedly omitted important biographical details, especially in regard to the Nazi period and to his troubled family life.
8. Grzimek neglected to report that he had joined the Nazi Party in May of 1937. Inconclusive evidence also suggests that he may have been a member of the SA from 1933 to 1935. In her discussion of these facts, Claudia Sewig argues that Grzimek, while he was never a true believer in the Nazi cause, was an undeniable opportunist who joined the Party in order to fast-track his career (*Bernhard Grzimek*, 55–60).
9. Jens Ivo Engels, *Naturpolitik in der Bundesrepublik: Ideenwelt und politische Verhaltensstile in Naturschutz und Umweltbewegung 1950–1980* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schoeningh, 2006), 229.
10. For the history of Serengeti National Park, and of the complex natural and social environment that the Grziméks were entering more generally, see Shetler, *Imagining Serengeti* [missing rest of publication info]; Roderick R. Neumann, *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 122–56; and Jonathan S. Adams and Thomas O. McShane, *The Myth of Wild Africa: Conservation Without Illusion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 59–84. On the Fauna Preservation Society, see Neumann, 137–38, as well as Richard Sidney, Richmond Fitter, and Peter Scott, *The Penitent Butchers: The Fauna Preservation Society, 1903–1978* (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 1978).
11. Shetler, Neumann as well as Adams and McShane are all critical of Grzimek, with perhaps the strongest criticism coming from Adams and McShane, *The Myth of Wild Africa*, 50–53.
12. For a detailed critique of these views and of Grzimek’s rhetorical strategies in *No Room for Wild Animals*, see Michael Flitner, “Vom ‘Platz an der Sonne’ zum ‘Platz für Tiere,’” in *Der deutsche Tropenwald: Bilder, Mythen, Politik*, ed. Michael Flitner (Berlin: Campus Verlag, 2000), 244–62.
13. Shetler, *Imagining Serengeti*, 211.
14. For a comprehensive summary of Grzimek’s efforts on behalf of nature tourism in Tanzania, see Thomas Lekan, “*Serengeti Shall Not Die*: Bernhard Grzimek, Wildlife Film, and the Making of a Tourist Landscape in East Africa,” *German History* 29.2 (2011): 224–64.
15. Torma, *Eine Naturschutzkampagne*, 179–87. On occidentalism more generally, see Axel Schildt, *Zwischen Abendland und Amerika: Studien zur westdeutschen Ideenlandschaft der 50er Jahre* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1999).
16. Shortly after Grzimek’s return to Europe, a conversation with an African university student studying in Germany caused him to revise his opinions. He now spoke out in favor of the African independence struggle, since he had to concede that three hundred years of British rule in India had provided scant evidence to support his thesis that Europeans were better stewards of natural resources than the people they colonized. This conversion is described in the book version of

- Serengeti Shall Not Die*. See Bernhard and Michael Grzimek, *Serengeti Shall Not Die*, trans. E. L. Rewald and D. Rewald (New York: Dutton & Co., 1960), 173. The corresponding passage in the German edition can be found in Bernhard and Michael Grzimek, *Serengeti darf nicht sterben: 367 000 Tiere suchen einen Staat* (Munich: Malik, 2009), 192–93. Since the English translation is sometimes inadequate, I will subsequently provide parenthetical references to both editions and have occasionally amended the translation. In each case, the first page number refers to the English translation, the second to the German original. Unfortunately, Grzimek's new embrace of African nationalism also led him to fraternize with bloodthirsty dictators such as Joseph Mobutu and Idi Amin, whom he approached as powerful allies in his quest to build more national parks in Africa (see Sewig, *Bernhard Grzimek*, 356–57).
17. Hediger, "Das Tier auf unserer Seite," 296. For a longer treatment of the intimate relationship between military aviation and cinematography, see Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989), 11–30.
  18. For the filmic prehistory of such shots, see Sabine Hake, "Mapping the Native Body: On Africa and the Colonial Film in the Third Reich," in *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and its Legacy*, eds. Sara L. Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne M. Zantop (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 163–88. Grzimek, to be clear, nowhere suggests that Africans are in any way biologically inferior to Europeans or that they more closely resemble animals. In fact, he explicitly mocks such views in the book version of *Serengeti Shall Not Die* (166–69/187–90), where he also asserts that: "For me, a negro is an equal and a brother" (169/190). But he does consistently take a patronizing attitude toward the native communities, discounting their own traditions of animal stewardship and casting them as the inevitable victims of, rather than possible participants in, the modernizing process.
  19. Shetler, *Imagining Serengeti*, 35. In July of 1959, just months after Bernhard Grzimek wrapped up his work in the Serengeti, Mary Leakey discovered the fossilized remains of one of humanity's earliest ancestors, the hominin *Paranthropus boisei*, in the nearby Olduvai Gorge. In later editions of the book version of *Serengeti Shall Not Die*, Grzimek made sure to remind his readers of this discovery as part of his general strategy to establish the Serengeti as the last remaining remnant of the Garden of Eden, but he ignored the implication that hominins and animals had coexisted quite comfortably in the area for more than 1.5 million years.
  20. For a concise history of the notion of cultural heritage, see Derek Gillman, *The Idea of Cultural Heritage* (Leicester: The Institute of Art and Law, 2006). For a more detailed legal history, see Wayne Sandholtz, *Prohibiting Plunder: How Norms Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
  21. In the opening chapter of *Serengeti Shall Not Die*, Grzimek mentions that he and Michael "took an honorific lap" (40/37) around the Aswan dam during their flight to Tanganyika (the reference is to the older "low dam," not the soon-to-be-constructed "high dam"). The controversy also helps shed light on an otherwise strange comparison Grzimek makes later in the book: "It is true that occasionally dams must be built at the expense of an old church or mansion, but it would be an offence against good taste if the *nouveau riche* were permitted to use the old murals and masonry for target practice before they disappeared under the rising water. Such is the case with the last elephants, lions, herds of zebras and rhinos" (242/277).
  22. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage," Nov. 16, 1972, Article 4. [whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext](http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext). On the importance of Abu Simbel for the World Heritage Convention, see *The 1972 World Heritage Convention: A Commentary*, eds. Francesco Francioni and Federico Lenzerini (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 223.
  23. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 131.
  24. As Anton Kaes has recently pointed out, the young Werner Herzog studied shots such as this one

- before he filmed his own meditations on an African “paradise” in *Fata Morgana* (1971). Anton Kaes, “Zwischen Parodie und Phantasmagorie: Das ‘Paradies’ in Werner Herzogs *Fata Morgana*,” in *Paradies: Topografien der Sehnsucht*, eds. Claudia Benthien and Manuela Gerlof (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2010), 231–48. I would like to thank Brad Prager for bringing this article to my attention.
25. On Grzimek’s reaction to his son’s death, see Sewig, *Bernhard Grzimek*, 250–57.
  26. Within the German tradition, the most prominent example of such a text is arguably Alexander von Humboldt’s *Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of the Indigenous Peoples of America*. See Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 109–40.
  27. Robert Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1920–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).
  28. The black shape in the center of Fig. 3 is the Malpais Lava Flow, which measures about 22 miles across. I am grateful to Doyle Pilan, archivist at the White Sands Missile Range Museum, for identifying it for me. For an inspired introduction to the history of orbital photography, see Robert Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
  29. In addition to Robert Poole’s *Earthrise*, see especially Dennis Cosgrove, “Contested Global Visions: One-World, Whole-Earth, and the Apollo Space Photographs,” in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 84, no. 2 (June 1994): 270–94, as well as David Sington’s 2007 documentary film, *In the Shadow of the Moon*.
  30. “Das fliegende Zebra,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, June 21, 2009.
  31. As David Kim pointed out to me during a guest lecture at the University of Notre Dame on February 7, 2011, for instance, the “Earthrise” and “Blue Marble” photographs hold considerably less emotional relevance for Koreans than they do for Americans.

