

Abstract: “Forest aesthetics” (*Shinrin bigaku*) emerged in early 20th c. Japan among forestry scholars, government officials, nature writers and others as a way to call attention not only to the aesthetic value of Japan’s forests (beyond their economic value), but to the unique “forest-loving” character of the Japanese people, a character ostensibly shaped by Japan’s richly forested landscape. Yet, the record of deforestation at this time calls into question the basic claims of forest aesthetics. I explain this contradiction by presenting forest aesthetics as a retreat from the excesses of capitalism (environmental degradation, new temporalities and an accelerated pace of life, alienation, etc.) into an ideology of aesthetic feeling and “timeless” culture. While forest aesthetics contributed to broader efforts to regulate the population under a constructed narrative of timeless culture, it did little to effectively address Japan’s environmental problems. I suggest that this critique is necessary, given the way early 20th c. forest aesthetics informs present-day Japanese reactionary ecological theory, and the extent to which the latter impacts environmental philosophy elsewhere in the world. Finally, I suggest a study of forest aesthetics—an ideology that misdirects efforts to reconcile the relationship between society and environment—provides a way to consider capitalist social reproduction, that is, how capitalism reproduces itself together with the environmental problems it generates.

Bio:

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