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Into the Woods. Getting Lost and Meeting Witches.

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Abstract: The article examines different aspects of woods in fantasy as well as horror literature and aims to discuss the main functions of forests, also considering their traditional purposes in the realms of folktales. As the settings of supernatural, forests are closely linked to the genres of fantasy and horror. Because they lack man-made structures, they have potential for disorder, and this leads characters acting inside the forests into lostness and abandonment from every civilized system. The state of confusing spatial organisation helps the unknown Other to emerge, while courts, villages or other human residential areas can be juxtaposed with the wilderness of the forest. As folktale forests are typically settings of the supernatural, forests have traditionally been places of mythical adventures. When entering the woods, a hero-to-be begins the journey of his or her personal development and hero-shaping, as he or she faces the peculiar personages of the forest and fights his or her way through the manifold challenges. In addition to their function as settings where the Other emerges, forests also form isolated systems where the locus amoenus as well as the locus terribilis can be found.

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Have you ever been to the forest, maybe on a late summer's Sunday when the light falls through the canopy of leaves in the right angle to make the insects shine? Have you ever been there and felt that beneath the raspberry bushes a bunch of fairies should linger to complete the picture? And then, maybe you have been to the forest when the light was down and every sound send shivers down your spine; and what a variety of sounds there is, in the woods, in the dark. Indeed, it seems not to be argued that forests have always been places closely associated with both men and the unknown, ever so intriguing Other. May it be a place of calm rest, or of exciting encounters, the woods have been and still are varying subjects of fantasy literature, film and fine arts.

Think back to the latest fantasy movie you watched which was set in one or the other medieval background and think about the inevitable forest and its creatures; or picture the last epic novel with its inherent maps. I dare guess that forests make up a good percentage of the whole setting and that they are the backdrop to friendly rides, hunting scenes or maybe even uncanny pursuits. In addition to this, there is a good chance that these forests are home to some supernatural beings. Even if the importance of the forest in modern, urban fantasy decreases, it still seems to appear in a large share of fantastic works. But before getting deeper into the subject of the wood in

works of fantasy, allow me a short glimpse into general philosophical reflections on forests to complete the picture.

When Michel Foucault developed the concept of *heterotopia*, he did not, primarily, have woods in mind. But understanding his construct as a way to describe spaces that consist of more meaning than the obvious one, we find the woods fitting perfectly into his deliberations. In six principles Foucault describes the constitution of heterotopias, defining them as being a constant of human groups, combining many places in one and being linked to a system of opening and closure (Foucault 321). Another fundamental feature of heterotopias is that they always fulfil a certain function: for example, being a somewhat holy place that is reserved for a special group of people or an isolated space with the purpose of allowing a certain action to take place. Seeing the topos of the forest as a heterotopia, for it constitutes a space that is separated and equipped with varying connotations, a question arises: what is the function of the forest in fantastic arts and media?

Chaos and Lostness

Forests have always been a form of landscape (of course, in the past centuries a bigger and more widespread one than it is today) that somehow constantly has been *there*, a more or less steady module throughout the ages that has not been a part of the urbanized structure of social order. One of the attributes that preponderates the wood-space is its natural lack of organised structure and this leads to the wood being conceived as a confusing area. This imagery entails different ramifications for the artistic implementation of the forest. Most common is the one which displays not only the physical forlornness of a figure being lost in the woods but also his or her mental state.

> Ich hör die Bächlein rauschen,
> im Walde her und hin,
> im Walde in dem Rauschen,
> und weiß nicht, wo ich bin. (Eichendorff 30)

> I hear the brooklets brawling
> in the wood back and forth.
> In the wood, amidst the brawl,
> I know not where I am.

The beginning of the poem "In der Fremde", which could be translated as "In the Outland" written by Joseph von Eichendorff in 1833 expresses the feeling of loss of self in the nature-space at the highest grade. Concerning the "Her und Hin", the "Back and forth" in the given translation, there are many interpretations, starting from nearness to remoteness of God to the total loss of any self-localization; a deprivation that grows over the border of just being strayed in the forest where no socially built rules seem to apply.

It is the same duplicity of the inextricable mental state and the inextricable environment that shapes the wood-metaphor in Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* when at the very beginning, the narrator gets lost in *Selva Oscura*, the dark forest.

> Midway in the journey of our life
> I came to myself in a dark wood,
> for the straight way was lost.

> Ah, how hard it is to tell
> the nature of that wood, savage, dense and harsh
> the very thought of it renews my fear! (Alighieri Inf. 1 1-6)

As this and the aforementioned example shows the forest is used as a space of loss of self in a double way: Loosing orientation in the unconquered nature space, and losing the civilized,

structured self, both pointing back to the feeling of overpowering by the force that lingers in the sublime landscape that Arthur Schopenhauer stresses (Schopenhauer 242); the force that is "incomparably superior to the individual and that threatens him with annihilation." (242). In the context of arts, the wood therefore often functions as a visualisation of utter lostness of the figure, as displayed by Hartmann von Aue's Iwein, a chivalric hero who loses his mind as well as his clothes when he can no longer stand the courtly pressure and escapes into the woods. Just after a period of time when he lives like a wild animal in the forest without knowing where he came from, he gains healing through a magical ointment, slays the dragon, kills the giants, saves a damsel and finally returns back to his initial courtly position. The chaotic forest-space offers no clear room for the description of the action (Schnyder 135) so that settings as glades, paths, streams or the like structure the space, while the undergrowth is seldom more than the location of lurking dangers.

The display of the *Other*

The incoherent forest-space enkindles the feeling of strangeness so it stands to reason that it functions as a setting where the unknown *Other* can manifest and take place. Concerning old German literature, it is not possible to imagine the contents of these epic works without the realms of forests (for it offers an opportunity for an undisturbed *Tête-à-tête,* invites to hunt, enables the one travelling incognito to preserve his anonymity and offers the one escaping a reliable shelter [Ackermann-Arlt 222]) which, while being an uncharted form of landscape, present the juxtaposition to every civilizing security of towns with the high likelihood of supplies of nutrition, information and the shielding walls of a room. As forests compose the socio-economic contrast of spacial construction, they also display the area of adventure (Peter 226). The marvellous happens in this natural space that is free of every civilizing, man-made structure. As soon as the chevalier leaves the court and enters the woods, the adventures begin and the fantastic, marvellous *Other* takes over. It is the place where hostile knights are met as well as giants, witches or dreadful creatures, and this very structure can still be found in fantastic literature and film, even though knights are often replaced by other, slightly modernised characters. While the *Other* has no (or at least not the same) supremacy outside, it dominates the realms of the nature-space, may it be in the form of affirmative forces that lead to healing, or threatening, dangerous subjects that shape a challenge for the hero who ranges the forest. One of the most important features of the forest in fantastic media is the fact that human legitimacies and sometimes even nature principles do not apply while time and space forms an unstructured cluster.

So it can be stated that the forest offers – due to its given disorganized constitution – a setting where the mystical *Other* that functions as a catalyst for the development of the characters as well as the storyline, spreads. At the same time, it establishes an excluded area which allows the hero to cross boundaries and therefore initiate the *sujet* (Lotman 330), a significant event.

Folktale Forests

The literary genre that makes use of the above mentioned features in a simplified but nonetheless extensive form is the *Volksmärchen*. The folktale displays the forest not only as one determined setting, but also as a location that can shift its connotation (Frost 323). That way fairy tale-forest are on the one hand places of pureness and quaint innocence. On the other hand, they are spaces of danger, where the characters are at the mercy of wild creatures and have to deal with a handful of hostile wonders. Forests are the landscape of wilderness, whereas fields and meadows always seem to stand in closer relation with human-made surroundings; upright people, therefore, inhabit the woods only if they work there. Following fairy tale logic, everyone else seems to be either forced to live in the cover of the forest because she or he is no part of the society or because she or he derives

from the wood. But most of the residents do not really want to live inside this excluded area: neither the outcasts, the witches and sorcerers nor all the old women that form the socially separated wood inventory (Jung-Kaiser 42). While the non-magical beings live outside the woods, in cabins, castles or even small villages, the realms of the forest contain what is left of an even older, more mythical and by all means more magical form of narrative material. Folktale woods originate from a tradition of mystified nature spaces and untamed wilderness. But they are seldom as complex as for example Tolkien's converted version of the Mirkwood or his creations of Lothlórien or Fangorn that all bear certain characteristics and are recognizable because of their distinct elaboration.

In fairy tales, especially the French and German ones, forests are always shaped person- and situation-dependent, for the action-based plot revolves around and sticks to the protagonist (Lüthi 27). These areas barely carry names and more often are just the right, opaque environment to harbour the supernatural. Fairy tales often function through the dialogue between non-magical and magical beings and that dialogue takes place outside of man-made comfort zones. In one of the Grimm Brother's most famous fairy tale, *Snow-White and the Seven Dwarves*, the young princess is sent out into the forest by her evil step-mother to get murdered by the huntsman.

> She called a huntsman, and said, "Take the child away into the forest; I will no longer have her in my sight. Kill her, and bring me back her heart as a token." The huntsman obeyed, and took her away; but when he had drawn his knife, and was about to pierce Snow-white's innocent heart, she began to weep, and said, "Ah dear huntsman, leave me my life! I will run away into the wild forest, and never come home again." (Brothers Grimm 128)

As soon as the huntsman lets her go, the girl is part of the wilderness and can no longer get back to the social structure of her father's court. The way through the woods – the time period where the girl is neither in the presence of the huntsman nor of the dwarves – is in many movie versions a rich interval of forest-terror. In the 1937 Walt Disney movie or the latest screen adaptation *Snow White and the Huntsman*, the forest appears also (but admittedly not only) as an animated and hostile place, as long as the girl is forlorn and at the mercy of nature. The text presents this situation as a period of utter lostness: "But now the poor child was all alone in the great forest, and so terrified that she looked at every leaf of every tree, and did not know what to do." (Brothers Grimm 128) Snow White is lucky, for she is not, as the huntsman assumed, devoured by wild beasts but finds shelter in the home of the dwarves who, living in the wilderness, epitomise the *Other* as a shielding and helping instance. Hänsel and Gretel, on the contrary, are just deceived by the charms of the candy house that mocks safety in the middle of the nature space; the witch functions as the innermost fear of loss of self and destruction. Her house is set in the heart of the wood, into the farthest point from every civilized area and she abuses the trust of the children who have been sent into the forest to starve to death. We know that the only way the kids can escape the mighty old witch is for them to burn her alive before they get eaten themselves. This traumatising act takes place unseen in the wilderness of wood and witch house.

Like Hänsel and Gretel's nameless witch, other witches also inhabit forests and live between the trees and undergrowth with their mostly feral companions. For the Slavic area, Baba Jaga seems to be the most popular witch to dwell in her chicken legged house in the nature space. Due to her famousness she also became a part of fantasy literature, where she sometimes even is acting outside of the realms of the forest. In the fantastic novel *Monday begins on a Saturday* written by the Strugatsky Brothers Baba Jaga plays a role as well as in the *Hellboy* universe, where she appears as a somehow animalised, rather daunting creature. But of course not only witches inhabit the wood, witty and dangerous animals also do.

That way Little Red Riding Hood meets the wolf, when she wants to visit her sick grandmother, who lives in a house in the woods (instead of the wicked witch). A path leads to her destiny and for that score the wood is no longer absolute wilderness. When the wolf lures the girl

away from the trail into the wild, she loses track of time while picking flowers. It is the huntsman who constitutes a link between the wilderness and society and therefore unites both levels and acts as the liberating entity.

Overcoming the chaos

Forests form, as stated before, a realm that stands in contrast to the civilised structure. It is this seclusion that forges the right setting for adventures and thus operates as the needed contrast to any social and protective pattern. When the main character sets forth to face various challenges ahead, he or she has to cross borders to initiate the process of being shaped as a hero. As soon as he/she steps out of the collective safekeeping, he/she leaves the environment he/she is used to and enters the unknown and dangerous (Campbell 79). It is this first detachment that instigates the condition of liminality that transfers the hero-to-be into the uncertain state of experiencing adventures and proving himself worthy (or failing). Forests as climes of adventures inspired next to the classical monomythic journey, fantasy works of different genres. Of course role-plays and game books are also affected by the topos of the forest. Fantasy Forest for example is the name of a series that is partly set in the Dungeons and Dragons Universe. The first book, *The Ring, the Sword and the Unicorn* leads the main character – who acts through the instructions of the reader – into a magical forest and as a result of this into manifold adventures. While fighting his way through the disorder and averting threats, the hero will sooner or later be able to leave the disorganized nature space and enter society again as a strengthened being.

Of course, not all storylines follow the fulfilled hero-journey in which the forest is little more than a catalyst or an arbitrary display of a nature setting. With its attributes of the confusing, pathless unknown and the potential *Other* that derives from it, the demonstration of human inferiority prevails.

Forest terror

While folktale woods include places with negative as well as positive significance, woods have become the metaphor for the brute wild in the genre of horror, located far from every civilized space, where terrifying creatures and strange outcasts pose an unpredictable threat to everybody else. Horror tales display and embody terrors which are both physical and psychological and send the characters to confront these fears. Thus, "[h]orror is nurtured by the fears of death and pain, and in our dark fears of the unknown" (Wisker 2). The forest qualifies as a fitting space for horror for three reasons: it is, as stated before, an uncharted and therefore unknown and confusing setting, it harbours all kinds of entities that can, of course, expose a deadly threat, and it opens a fantastic plane, where the *Other* is staged.

The narrative structure of horror stories that take place in the woods often revolves around a group of people getting in the forest for one reason or the other and being later on confronted by some mystical, inexplicable danger. Often, there is only one survivor: the *evil Other* in the nature space. As Wisker sums up: "horror is located in both the real and the nightmarish imaginary" (Wisker 2). This is a reason why the means which carry horror within the story emanate often from the realms of the fantastic. In 1978, Sam Raimi directed *Within the Woods*, a short film that was, due to the visual violence, forbidden and later redone as *The Evil Dead*. Five students spend their vacation in the hills of Tennessee. In the isolated cabin where they stay, they find the "Sumerian Book of the Dead". After reading it out loud, demons arise, possess some of the students and the foundation for 85 minutes of splatter and horror is laid. In 2011 the movie was adapted again in a remake running under the title *The Cabin in the Woods*. The original version was extended to include a governmental organisation that watches and directs the acting and dying of the young

people from an underground laboratory. The full range of horror arises in this somehow voyeuristic movie, but stays inside the secluded forest.

Another example of horror in the woods is perfectly presented by the pioneer movie of hand camera action: *The Blair Witch Project* (1998). Three documentary filmmakers stay in the woods of Maryland to collect material about the legend of the Blair Witch, who is said to reside in the forests. As the days go by, the juveniles get deeper and deeper into the solitude of the wild and finally find the house of the witch. It can be seen as an allusion to Hänsel and Gretel that the witch in the heart of the forest now grants no salvation; the witch who is the ruler over the nature space appears to be the end of the students' existence. Besides the elaborate marketing, the origin of the movie's story is also closely linked to the woods of Maryland. It is said, that the actors were sent out into the isolated state of wilderness with little equipment: "In order to have as little contact as possible with the actors during the making of the film, Sánchez and Myrick used a Global Positioning System (GPS) device to keep in touch with their actors." (Clinton, CNN.com) The Seneca Creek State Park, which served as shooting location and covers 6.300 acres of wilderness, is a nature space and this exposed the actors to a state of constant physical and mental strain, so it is also stated that: "near the end of the eight day shoot when the characters in the film were running low on food, the crew also cut back on the actors' rations for the day" (Clinton, CNN.com).

While the protagonists of *The Blair Witch Project* confront a threat that never becomes visible and instils fear by showing the terror of others (and therefore spreading to the empathetic viewer), the menace in Wrong turn (2003) is obvious.

Within the large woodland of West Virginia, a car accident happens after a young lad takes the short cut through the forest because of the crammed highway (and thus enters the nature space, like Little Red Riding Hood who also leaves the path to transgress into the forest.) He collides with the car of five young people and has to face the first dismay in a row, because the accident had been caused by a barb wire. The only dwelling in the almost impenetrable forest is the shack of three woodlanders, who pursue their cannibalistic passions and constitute the Monstrous in their looks and their acting. Like in fairy tales where the inhabitants of the forests differ from the "normal" people outside, the woodlanders deviate from predictability. They are malformed as a result of inbreed and thus constitute the combination of deformed ugliness and dangerousness in a manner typical of horror – and of course they slaughter one of the "intruders" after the other. The uncertainty concerning their true nature points back to the oscillation between categories which form the monstrous while grading is impossible (Overthun 50). The separate fragments of civilisation, like the shack or the tree house with a radio which is later set on fire and stormed by the woodlanders, bring only short dated shelter. Even the policeman, who could theoretically act like the folktale huntsman as someone who restores order, falls victim to the chase in the nature space which is governed by those who are closer to animals than to humans. In a manner similar to the evil which is never annihilated completely, the shack stays a lurking danger and with it the forest further on a wild, hunted area.

The danger emerges out of the forest, but it not always only stays in the realms of the woods like in the above mentioned examples; it sometimes encroaches on the civilized areas as well. In *Shallow Ground* (2004), a boy covered in blood who seems to be the culmination of a handful of murdered people, rises out of the forest to seek revenge, while in *Broken* (2006) a young woman is abducted and tormented by a man, and this torture of course takes place in the heart of a forest.

The function of the woods within horror excels in the representation of a space, where the unknown and threatening takes place and where nature outweighs any human reasoning. The setting of the nature space condemns the people acting in it to apply to the only rule given: the survival of the fittest. The display of hunt-like structures is therefore an organization of narration we often face in the genre of horror.

Shelter spaces

As stated, forests in the horror genre mostly present areas of the unknown and harmful where entities act in an irrational and deadly way, whereas in examples of the fantasy genre, forests often are areas of refuge and have positive connotations. The forest as the *locus terribilis* leaves the characters no chance to settle and to be safe. It sets up the opposite standpoint to the forest as *locus amoenus* which permits a heterotopic space of immunity and security.

While the forest can always be seen as the other side of social and urbanised structure, it of course allows a space of retreat. These escapist aspects apply to medieval literature like Wolfram's Parzival with Herzeloyde hiding herself and her son in the realms of the forest, and thus shielding him from every courtly pressure, and also to romanticised aesthetics where forests as clusters of pure nature make up a pristine unity. Therefore woods can also be seen as cathartic areas of sorts in the genre of fantasy. The mystical *Other* which inspirits the forests is now a primal form of nature or even a godlike presence. Fantasy movies like *Merlin* (1998), or the popular productions like *Snow-White and the Huntsman* (2013) or *Maleficent* (2014), compose the enchanted forest as a delicate nature space which encompasses paradisiac conditions. As long as these often time-independent areas are unreached by human influence, they offer a sanctuary of safety and healing powers.

Conclusion

Forests in fantastic media show different pictures of nature spaces and cannot be summarized in just one term. From what is stated above, we can deduce the most important functions of the forest in fantasy:

1. Forests form the social and economic juxtaposition to every human organised area and thus represent a nature space that is free of social rules and values. The only principle that applies is that the stronger one (or the one being in possession of some magical help) rules the situation. This separation constitutes the forest as a heterotopic space that permits the characters to slip into a liminal state when entering the forest.

2. Due to the lack of structure, it is hard to constitute narration. Paths, brooklets or meadows are needed to organize the nature space in favour of the storyline. Simultaneously, the confusing composition enables the mystical *Other* to take place. Characters who live in the forest are either part of the *Other* (in the form of magical beings) or breakaways who are no longer part of the society that dominates the outside.

3. The absence of structure and the presence of the *Other* function as a *locus terribiles*. The Monstrous lingers inside the nature space and motivates a storyline which conjures horror. The mystical threat, as well as the menacing nature, takes over to underline human inferiority. While the genre of horror uses forests first and foremost as spaces of unknown dangers and terror, fantasy includes different aspects to the woods.

4. Depending on the genre, the absence of structure and the presence of the *Other* also functions as the locus *amoenus* which offers a secret hideaway. In this case, the forest displays a pure and cathartic shelter which allows the characters to withdraw from society.

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