Narrating Disruptive Encounters in the Forest: Hunting, Animal Lives, and Ecology

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Abstract

Over the last century, three popular writers and media personalities have written bestsellers and created TV programs in order to alert the general public to the suffering of wild animals as well as the deleterious effects on young trees caused directly or indirectly by hunting and forestry practices. Austrian journalist and writer Felix Salten published *Bambi: A Story of Life in the Woods* (1923), using a baby deer's perspective. German journalist and literary author Horst Stern shocked the nation with his TV program *Remarks about the Stag* (1971), which shows the brutality of hunting; his 1989 *Jagdnovelle (The Last Hunt)* weaves together a hunter's perspective with his prey animal's experience. In recent years, German forester Peter Wohlleben has shifted the focus from animals to plants by publishing a series of popular books about the forest, starting with *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2015). This essay examines how Salten, Stern, and Wohlleben all humanize their animal and plant characters, including through a form of "critical anthropomorphism" (Weik von Mossner)—and are criticized for it. They also incorporate ethology, i.e. observations of animal behavior and the forest environment, as well as scientific knowledge, as they attempt to evoke their audience's empathy for their nonhuman characters. Hunting pressure and the violent disruption of the lives of the animals leads to an "ecology of fear" instead of an "ecology of subjects" that would align better with changing perceptions of "nature" (Soentgen). Ethical questions concerning the mass killing of Europe's largest mammals remain as it does not succeed in reducing deer overpopulation or damage to the forest ecosystem, perpetuating Germany's forest/game conflict.

Keywords: hunting, anthropomorphism, Felix Salten, Horst Stern, Peter Wohlleben

Resumen

Durante el último siglo, tres escritores populares y personalidades de los medios han escrito bestsellers y creado programas de televisión para alertar al público en general sobre el sufrimiento de los animales salvajes, así como los efectos nocivos en los árboles jóvenes causados directa o indirectamente por las prácticas de caza y silvicultura. El periodista y escritor austríaco Felix Salten publicó *Bambi: A Story of Life in the Woods* (1923), utilizando la perspectiva de una cría de ciervo. El periodista y autor literario alemán Horst Stern conmocionó a la nación con su programa de televisión *Remarks about the Stag* (1971), que muestra la brutalidad de la caza; su novela de 1989 *Jagdnovelle (The Last Hunt)* entrelaza la perspectiva de un cazador con la experiencia de su animal de presa. En los últimos años, el ingeniero forestal alemán Peter Wohlleben ha cambiado el enfoque de los animales a las plantas al publicar una serie de libros populares sobre el bosque, comenzando con *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2015). Este ensayo examina cómo Salten, Stern y Wohlleben humanizan sus personajes animales y vegetales, incluso a través de una forma de "antropomorfismo crítico" (Weik von Mossner), y son criticados por ello. También incorporan etología, es decir, observaciones del comportamiento animal y el entorno forestal, así como conocimiento científico, mientras intentan evocar la empatía de su audiencia por sus personajes no humanos. La presión de la caza y la perturbación violenta de las vidas de los animales conducen a una "ecología del miedo" en lugar de una "ecología de los sujetos" que se alinearía mejor con las percepciones cambiantes de la "naturaleza" (Soentgen). Siguen existiendo dudas éticas sobre la matanza masiva de los mamíferos más grandes de Europa, ya que no

logra reducir la superpoblación de ciervos ni los daños al ecosistema forestal, lo que perpetúa el conflicto entre bosques y caza en Alemania.

Palabras clave: caza, antropomorfismo, Felix Salten, Horst Stern, Peter Wohlleben

Hunting, Central European Forests, and Disturbance Ecology

Human hunting of non-human animals in central European forests has shaped their ecology as much as the harvesting of wood or the planting of select arboreal species for commercial purposes.[1] The balance between non-human animal predators and their prey was disrupted long ago when humans hunted bear, wolf, and lynx to extinction. While their fire power would turn humans into a kind of überpredator, it also created a hunting culture obsessed with amassing ossified animal parts and thus requiring the availability of plentiful game, such as red deer and roe deer.[2] However, these animals' browsing of the buds and leaves of saplings would then compromise or even prevent forest rejuvenation. Over the last few centuries, resource-driven forestry aiming at productive harvests of wood, agricultural practices around the forests, and hunters' misguided concept of "care" for their game (*Hege*) has led to an overpopulation of cervids in the late 20th century, which is now negatively affecting the health and resilience of the forest ecosystem.

European public perception of what is conceived of as "nature," has also shifted during the last century. This is due in part to writers whose experiences of hunting and being in the forest opened their eyes and hearts to the impacts of sports hunting on the animals and plants affected by it: the violent disruption of the life trajectories of individual animals and plants but also of the state of the whole ecosystem. Writing about and filming these encounters between humans, animals, and plants is in turn an act that disrupts conventional perceptions of the relationship between a human society seen as dominant vis-à-vis a "nature" that is reduced to being a provider of resources. Narrating human/wildlife encounters in a way that respects and gives narrative agency to both sides, or even presents the perspective of non-human "nature," disrupts the established Western nature/culture dichotomy that has had such deleterious impacts on ecosystems at a planetary scale; such narratives may offer better ways to interact with the natural world on which human civilization depends. In her ethnographic study on mushrooms and human/forest interactions, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing asks "But how does one tell the life of the

[1] Since the Middle Ages, the aristocracy's hunting privilege and ensuing protection of forest stands from being cut down is one example, their overbreeding of deer for the hunt another. For a detailed history of Central European landscapes and their dynamic developments through phases of forestation and deforestation (resulting from different land uses) see Küster 1995 and 2019.

[2] Forester Wilhelm Bode convincingly and in great detail demonstrates how hunting in Germany is primarily trophy hunting, not hunting for meat, and not based on biological and ecological principles, which were actually ignored when the German Federal hunting law was established. As a result, as he states, lawful hunting in Germany is trophy hunting (Bode 96; and Bode and Emmert 16)

forest?" and deplores the fact that "we are not used to reading stories without human heroes" and think that "talking animals are for children and primitives," essentially silencing their voices (155). In contrast, even though they kill animals, Indigenous "subsistence hunters recognize other living beings as 'persons,'" which erases the boundary between human and non-human animals (155, also cf. Ingold 11-113; and Descola 138-143). I see this way of relating to other living beings reflected to some degree in the hunter's paradox of loving what you kill, and more explicitly in the popular forest narratives by the former hunters I will discuss.

Human hunting can be a violent disruption or disturbance among many other factors that change the dynamics and biological rhythms of an ecosystem, especially when carried out at scale. In scientific language, ecologists define disturbances as "temporally and spatially discrete events that lead to the loss of living biomass and change the availability of resources in biotic communities" (Jentsch et al. 15). Disturbances are different from "stresses" or "environmental variability" that occur continuously (Jentsch et al. 15). As we will see later, year-round hunting pressure causes stress for forest animals. "Environmental variability" is actively prevented by humans managing forests in such a way that they will not change over into an open savanna landscape of grasslands, as might happen when, according to Frans Vera's megaherbivory theory, large herbivores dominate (Senn 302-304; Wohlleben and Ibisch 145).[3] Unlike what most humanists think, disturbance is not always damage (Tsing 160). It can be positive, neutral, or negative; its determination as one or the other is crucial but difficult in Germany's forest/game conflict.

The close connection between the health of European forest ecosystems and human activities is coming into ever sharper focus with the arrival of climatic impacts in the Anthropocene perhaps even more so since these forests have been shaped and co-created by humans over thousands of years and have long been anything but "natural" or primary forests.[4] Ever since human civilization was built at the expense of the forest—as Robert Pogue Harrison has argued—by cutting down its trees to create space for farmland and cities, and by exploiting its resources to support human life, the ecological balance in the forests that—presumably—had established itself before humans appeared on the scene has been altered, often to a state of damage or destruction—currently on a global scale, and with planetary consequences. As German forester and popular author Peter Wohlleben bluntly stated at the 2022 *Waldklimagipfel* (Forest Climate Summit) in Berlin, the European forest has been treated as a *Warenlager*—a warehouse *(Waldklimagipfel)*. In addition to the trees that provide wood as an energy source and construction material, this has included forest

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[3] In his investigation of the population dynamics of large herbivores and affected plant communities, Josef Senn discusses Vera's megaherbivory theory, which defines four stages a landscape may repeatedly go through as herbivore density fluctuates, cycling between grassland and forest with a shrub phase and shifting vegetation in between (302).

[4] "Practically all forests in Europe have been transformed in their structure and species composition during centuries or even millenia of multiple uses." (Wohlgemuth et al 4). "There are a few primary forests left in Europe, most have been replaced by commercial forests, or near-natural forest protection areas with different landscape conservation and management objectives." (Jentsch et al 12).

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animals that were, and still are, hunted for their meat and hides. But over the centuries, and in the case of deer, humans' primary target has become their antlers (though "clean," non-industrially produced, meat is increasingly valued as well). Antlers are useless in terms of material consumption but are pursued for their symbolic significance and value within the trophy cult practiced by a community of hunters seeking social status and performing their prowess and masculinity in the act, and surrounding the act, of hunting. The tremendous yield of millennia of European deer trophy hunting—in recent centuries also furthered by the extermination of their animal predators—is still on display in the wall-to-wall trophy collections in many castles, museums, hunting lodges, and cabins.[5]

While hunters exercise their "sport"—as recreational hunters like to call it—for many different reasons, the rise of the European bourgeoisie and increasing participation of all citizens in political and societal affairs, as well as, in the late twentieth century, the emergence of increased environmental consciousness, brought along changes in the public perception of hunting. This was also due to a changing relationship between humans and animals, and humans and plants, when it became apparent how much the so-called "natural environment"—which in European reality is a mostly cultural landscape—was being destroyed as a result of progress, i.e. population growth and development after the Second World War. Large infrastructure projects, such as highways and roads for an increasingly car-dominated transportation system fragmented the landscape, and industrialized, machine-dominated agricultural and forestry practices as well as the increasing significance of forests as areas for sports and recreation fundamentally changed the conditions for vegetal and animal life in this now human-dominated landscape. The invention of firearms had already contributed to the extinction of large predators in West European forests and allowed hoofed animals to reproduce unchecked, also supported by the human hunters' selection for taking down only antler-bearing male deer. In the German-speaking cultural region, hunters' goal was to have a large number of game animals available for their pleasure, and this led to the concept of *Hege* (care), i.e. the support of game animals through measures such as winter feeding and medicating for parasites.[6] This would significantly reduce their mortality rate, grow their herds, and ultimately lead to deer overpopulation—which could even be considered a form of domestication. Ever more human activity in the landscape for recreation as well as hunting has pushed a species (roe deer) that prefers to live in forest edge habitats deep into the forest during daylight hours. Since herbivores need a regular supply of food they will then browse the buds and leaves of young trees, preventing forest regeneration and rejuvenation. Better forestry practices and conservation efforts, such as attempts to increase tree species diversity in order to

[5] The colonial counterpart, i.e. trophy hunting in Africa, is at least as—if not more—complicated. An excellent fictional account of this situation is the recent novel *Trofee* (trophy, *Trophäe*) by Gaea Schoeters.

[6] On hunting and traditional practices of *Hege* in the past and present from an anthropological perspective see Gieser "Hunting Wild Animals in Germany."

create more mixed forest stands, may not be able to counteract high deer densities and the animals' appetite for the forest's young shoots. In their 2010 scientific study of the forest-game conflict, Christian Ammer and his collaborators state: "At high deer densities, however, many tree species are browsed equally irrespective of forest structure. This overrides all other environmental factors relevant for tree growth. Consequently, a long-term, near-natural management to achieve stable forest ecosystems can only be realized at low deer densities" (Ammer et al. 154).

Amid all environmental factors, such as acid rain in the 1970s and 1980s, forest monocultures, windthrow, and the drought caused by the climate crisis in recent years, according to this study, high deer densities have contributed most to preventing forest regeneration. While forest conservation efforts are underway, not least in the interest of the economic goals of private forest owners, who depend on revenue from selling wood, it has become all too obvious that the health of forests will not be achieved by only changing forestry practices—which is an extremely long-term project in any case. One result of the October 2022 *Forest Climate Summit,* organized by Wohlleben's *Forest Academy,* was the acknowledgement of several panelists that one of Germany's major obstacles for improving forest ecosystems is the lack of communication and collaboration between state foresters, private forest owners, hunters, nature convervationists, regulators, and politicians. The current forest-game conflict *(Wald-Wild-Konflikt)* is at least partially a result of uniquely German forestry practices and hunting traditions. This is also reflected in the complicated legal situation that arises from the fact that there are too many separate laws governing what happens in the forest: The federal forest law, the federal hunting law, the federal law for nature conservation, additional laws at the level of the states, and European legislation governing nature conservation, the "Natura 2000" laws.[7] These laws may actually contradict each other and primacy of one over the other is not clearly established, especially for the three laws at the federal level, leading to pre-programmed conflict. As a result, proponents of traditional forestry and hunting practices often clash with each other and also with the conservationists, who speak for "nature," i.e. for the plants and animals that are affected by forestry and hunting practices. A way out of this conflictual situation would require taking into consideration all networked ecosystems instead of the priorities of separate entities, and would also need to question the anthropocentric perspective that has led to this unbalanced state in the nation's forests. Healthy ecosystems are not just required for human survival; they deserve that humans take responsibility for their planet's non-human co-habitants whose habitats have been altered. Based on better information through many communication channels, the general public is starting to care about changing our resource-driven and ultimately destructive relationship with plants and animals and would like to put human and nonhuman partners on a more equal footing.

[7] For details see Wolf.

Insights and attempts to change the situation are actually not just recent developments. Already one hundred years ago the topic of hunting and forest ecology was taken up by a Viennese author whose book would become a major representation of the perspective of hunted forest animals and was seen as carrying an anti-hunting message. About fifty years later, another writer and media star presented the topic from a more scientific perspective, primarily concerned with the impact of deer overpopulation on forest rejuvenation, i.e. arguing from the perspective of the forest—and that meant advocating for increased hunting. And in our present time, a world-famous German forester and author is spreading the word, with great success, about the urgency to finally apply biological and ecological principles to both forestry and hunting practices and change the paradigm for human interaction with the other-than-human world.[8] Presenting a "solution" to the forest-game conflict, cannot, however, be the goal of this article (that would be hubris). What I attempt is to show how three popular and influential authors of fiction and creative non-fiction used their considerable powers of narrative persuasion to create empathy for the other-than-human world. They lent their voices to our planetary co-habitants in order to present their perspectives, starting with animals, with whom it is easier to identify, and eventually also speaking for plants, which, over the course of human history, have not received much empathy (they are more difficult to identify with), but whose intelligence and rich social life are becoming ever more apparent.[9]

Popular Forest Narratives

It is perhaps not surprising that some of the texts that contributed majorly to shaping public opinion of hunting over the last one-hundred years were produced by hunters, or former hunters. After all, they are the ones in close physical proximity to wild animals, immersed in the forest environment, and often also intellectually and emotionally challenged by what can be called the hunter's paradox: their professed deep love for the animals they would then be killing.[10] This paradox, a part of which is a deep empathy that can go as far as "becoming-animal" (see e.g. Gieser "Me, my Prey, and I"), is likely more present in the lone hunter who stalks their game or hunts from a hide, both of which lead to a close encounter with the live individual animal. Participants in driven hunts may instead be keen on ritual, spectacle, community with peers, and the competitive aspect of achieving a high number of trophies.

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[8] Changing the paradigm for human interaction with nature is also central in the well-known texts of two women who were both viciously attacked by wild animals and experienced being prey. Yet they still advocate for the rights of nature and stress our kinship with it rather than separation from it. They are Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood and French anthropologist Nastassja Martin.

[9] Michael Pollan presents a good introduction to the topic and growing literature about plant intelligence. Wohlleben and Simard discuss the social interactions taking place in forest systems. Wandersee & Schussler have explained why plants have been overlooked for so long.

[10] For a summary see Goodbody "The Call of the Wild" (168, 174-175), and "The Hunter as Nature Lover" (141-142).

In this essay, I will analyze three popular German-language forest narratives written by hunters who were, or are, also journalists, book authors, and well-known media personalities. Their narratives challenge stereotypes and mainstream thinking and have profoundly shaped and likely altered public opinion about the ancient cultural practice of hunting forest animals, more specifically hunting red deer and roe deer in the forests of Europe. These narratives are Viennese journalist Felix Salten's 1923 novel *Bambi: The Story of a Life in the Forest,* which reached an even larger audience through the Walt Disney film released in 1942—though Disney drastically altered the narrative and the message, particularly with regard to forest ecology[11]; German print and media star journalist Horst Stern's 1971 shocking TV program about the stag, his fictional hunting novella (*Jagdnovelle; The Last Hunt)*, and an essay; and finally Germany's most well-known forester and author Peter Wohlleben's current bestsellers *Das geheime Leben der Bäume (The Hidden Life of Trees,* 2015)*, Das Seelenleben der Tiere (The Inner Life of Animals,* 2016), *Waldwissen* (2023), and others, as well as video of his *Waldklimagipfel (Forest Climate Summit,* 2022). Each of these authors wrote in different historical circumstances, and their use of various genres such as fiction *(Bambi, The Last Hunt)*, creative non-fiction (Wohlleben) and—in the case of Stern and also Wohlleben—the visual medium of TV and streaming video, has certainly differentially shaped their rhetorical devices and kinds of impact on their audiences. Yet their purely linguistic-textual and partly visual forms of communication have one thing in common: they are based on narration. In the work of all three authors, there are similarities in the ways in which they approach their subject, e.g. how they present the killing of wild animals and how hunting affects them; what narrative perspectives and rhetorical techniques they employ in order to create empathy with their animal and plant characters; the literary device of anthropomorphism and how they view the boundaries between humans, animals, and plants, i.e. the "anthropological difference" (Borgards); and how they include observational and scientific knowledge about the forest as a biodiverse ecosystem.[12] All three authors narrate the disruptive encounters between humans, animals, and plants in such provocative ways that their voices themselves have engendered disruptive encounters—with the established discourses and frames of reference for the human/nature relationship.[13]

Felix Salten's Novel Bambi

Salten's novel *Bambi: The Story of a Life in the Forest* is an early influential text publicly questioning and criticizing a "sport" practiced by politically and economically

[11] The literature about the Disney movie and the impact of its "anti-hunting message" is vast but our focus is Salten's narrative. Two studies about the film are Cartmill on the "Bambi Syndrome," and Hastings on "Bambi and the Hunting Ethos."

[12] For an overview on how literature has presented trees and the forest, see Nitzke and Braunbeck.

[13] Martin Huth presents interesting reflections in general (not hunting-specific) about "encountering animals within and beyond human-animal cultures," and "the disruptive event of facing an animal" as an Other (53).

powerful and privileged members of human society, using the perspective of non-human creatures in the crosshairs of humans' deadly weapons capable of mass killings. Alexandra Böhm has argued "that around 1900 an 'animal turn' took place to which the new paradigm of empathy and the category of encounter are essential" (101), and that the "new way of seeing the animal as individual, with an own perspective, agency and consciousness is not limited to literature but widespread amongst the cultural and scientific discourses of the time" (117)—also resulting from Darwin's and Freud's challenges of the anthropocentric worldview. Though Böhm does not mention Salten, his story about an individual, even named, little deer likely reflects these discourses that, despite changed historical realities after WWI, would still be swirling in the 1920s. In his introduction to the new 2022 English translation of the novel, Jack Zipes reflects on the strangeness of the term used for hunted animals in English: "game". Unlike in other sports, which value fair competition, in the "game" of hunting, "animals"—as Jack Zipes states—"must play according to rules set only by their human opponents" (IX); loosing this "game" means death for the animals. In contrast, the German collective term *Wild* (wild) points to the nature/culture dichotomy that has shaped Western thought. In the European cultural landscape, which has practically no wilderness left (only 0.6% in 2020 according to WWF), the term *Wild* has become an anachronism and a euphemism, which contains the longing for a simpler, more "natural" life outside the constraints of civilization. This was certainly the case for Felix Salten, whose ambitions as a Jewish journalist from a poor family were hampered by a society mired in classism and racism. It has engendered readings of *Bambi* as an allegorical novel for human society—an interpretation certainly supported by many of Salten's rhetorical devices, such as portraying the deer community as a male-dominated and hierarchically organized society with kings and princes. As a hunter roaming the woods, Salten was able to leave behind his class and ethnic identity that had led to his social exclusion and outsider status despite his great success as a journalist. So he spent most of his free time, and likely experienced a kind of freedom, in the forests around Vienna, where he "owned his own hunting preserve" and "would wander about it night and day," as his daughter describes her father's "most beloved place," where he only "very rarely" fired a shot (Wyler-Salten, qtd. in Zipes XVI). In his lifetime, Salten did, however, kill "over two hundred roebucks" (Eddy 4, 201), thus exemplifying the hunter's paradox as both a killer and a lover of animals. In his defense of hunting, Salten argued that "instantaneous death in the wild is far more merciful than death in a slaughterhouse and much more humane than that caused by other animals" (Eddy 200). However, Salten ardently opposed the mass killings of driven hunts.

Bambi is based on Salten's close observation of animal life in the forest, including how "animals suffered persecution from hunting" (Zipes XVI). His empathy for the hunted animals is expressed even more clearly by choosing the perspective of an animal child—the *bambino* from which Bambi has derived its name—and breaking a taboo by creating a plot in which the mother is killed in a driven hunt even though, generally, sports hunters are "supposed to refrain from killing female deer" (Donald

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60). This scene also displays Salten's opposition to the driven hunt. However, even though Bambi is the protagonist and focal point in the narrative, from the very beginning Salten narrates the whole forest, which actually features in the novel's subtitle *The Story of a Life in the Forest* and also, interestingly, on the original cover illustration that does not even picture a deer but shows the forest bordering a meadow—the two natural spaces that constitute the lifeworld or *Umwelt* for deer. Salten portrays the forest habitat as a close-knit community of animals and plants, however, in contrast to the well-known Disney film, which transforms it into a sweet and idyllic paradise where all wild animals are friends and there is no animal-on-animal predation, Salten's little deer witnesses many scenes where animals become victims of other animals' often cruel predation.[14] The author of the original tale presents what Ralph Lutts calls a "sharp, naturalistic" and "ecologically and philosophically complex vision of nature" (165). An example would be how Salten describes the advice that the old prince (who is likely Bambi's father) gives to Bambi: "… of all his teachings, the most important one was you must learn to live alone, if you want to protect yourself, if you want to grasp the meaning of existence, if you want to attain wisdom" (Salten, *The Original Bambi* 144-145). This sentence actually contains the biological and ecological facts that roe deer evade their predators by hiding and thus do not live in large herds like red deer; rather than just stating this, Salten converts it into a roe deer philosophy of life; in the course of the novel, the motto "You must learn to live alone!" is also presented as a result of the stress and constant pressure from human hunting. A century later, Wohlleben will consider hunting to be a major reason why roe deer are forced from their preferred edge habitat into the forest where they will need to eat the leaves and buds of young trees in order to feed themselves. This deer dilemma is present in Salten's novel as he has constructed the open meadow at the forest's edge as a place that is both highly desirable and extremely dangerous—Bambi's cousin is shot when he leaves the safety of the forest cover. Already in Salten's novel, the reader learns how hunting and the mere fact of hunting pressure is a disruption and alteration of species-specific behavior, which then leads to a disruption of the lives of young trees and forest rejuvenation.

Anthropomorphism makes animal minds and moods accessible; it often comes from the author's empathy and creates empathy in the reader. In her study of *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and the Environmental Narrative,* Alexa Weik von Mossner finds that "[a]nthropomorphization is inevitable when nonhumans become narrative agents in human stories" but that there is a "wide spectrum of how it has been employed" (107, 106). A common way to convey animal consciousness is "the use of an *insider perspective* of animal experience" (Weik von Mossner 107, emphasis in original). While this can be done in autobiographical form, it can certainly also be achieved in a third person narrative. Salten's combining the insider perspective of a wild animal with the perspective of a child growing up, i.e. employing the genre of the

[14] Christian Schmitt has investigated the forms of the modern idyll as a precarious balance already present in Salten's story, which may also reflect the precarious times after WWI and echo Freud's essay on war and death.

coming-of-age story (*Bildungsroman*), has surely contributed to the fact that the narrative has become classified as children's literature and that its ecological content has been relegated to the background—as in the Disney movie, which majorly affected the story's reception. Salten's animal-child-centric narrative may not be considered as one that applies the "critical" or "reflected" anthropomorphism that behavioral ecologists Jesús Rivas and Gordon Burghardt, and also Swiss animal philosopher Markus Wild, have suggested, since it is primarily based on personal observation and does not include "the full range of available scientific data" that fifty or one hundred years later Horst Stern and Peter Wohlleben would include (qtd. in Weik von Mossner 113).

However, Salten succeeds in conveying the "ecology of fear"—the animals' fear of humans that environmental philosopher Jens Soentgen has identified as the "inside of the Anthropocene" (Soentgen 30). Soentgen acknowledges the subjective, emotional, and cognitive aspects of the hunter-prey relationship and how it furthers human/animal alienation (Soentgen 30). He describes how firearms have helped turn human aggression into destruction, and hunting into an obsession, aided by the fact that firearms have eliminated any danger for the human hunter. He points out that Salten's description of human hunting from the perspective of the animals demonstrates how their fear of humans is passed down through generations, how their chronic fear has biological consequences and eventually leads to an ecological downward spiral (Soentgen 93-94). Some effects are the fact that deer have become night active—staying hidden in dense forest during the day—and that this *forces* them to browse trees. While Salten's novel is informed by the author's ethological knowledge gained through personal observation on his hunting excursions, its main focus is on the animal and how it is affected by human predation.[15] It was not yet informed by the broader ecological insights into the interrelationships between humans, animals, and forest plants that came into focus for another journalist fifty years later, alongside the emergence of the German environmental movement: writer and media star Horst Stern.

Horst Stern's TV-Program about the Stag and Hunting Novella

Accordingly, Horst Stern's main focus was not an individual animal with a name that would engender empathy but the complete human/other-than-human ecosystem of the forest and the threat he witnessed there: young trees struggling to grow up, and old trees being damaged because of an overpopulation of deer. His arsenal of rhetorical weapons for expressing his views, his anger, and his warnings about the environmental devastation he saw all around him in post-war,

[15] The danger of animal-on-animal predation, e.g. by wolves on deer (not an issue in *Bambi)*, obviously also instills fear and is just as violent a disruption. How exactly it differs for prey animals from the threat of human predation would need to be investigated, now that wolves are establishing themselves again in Central Europe. However, currently the scale of animal-on-animal predation does not compare to the widespread and near continuous threat of human predation.

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development-focused Germany, was tremendous, and he would use it differently in the various genres and media in which he worked. I will focus on his shocking TV program on the stag, and his fictional "hunting novella" (*Jagdnovelle, The Last Hunt*).

On Christmas Eve 1971, Horst Stern—even though he had already been labelled Germany's "Anti-Grzimek" (Hickethier 114), i.e. as a voice critical of the cozying up to exotic wild animals on screen, as celebrity TV personality Bernhard Grzimek would do, and instead focusing on the problems of humans' treatment of the animals close by, shocked the nation with his TV program *Remarks about the Stag*, part of his regularly televised Stern's Hour (*Sterns Stunde*), in which he presented European wild and domesticated animals big and small.[16] The program about the stag would later be called his "most provoking, polemic, and effective journalistic piece" (Klünder 70), a piece that wrote German environmental history, or perhaps even fired the opening salve for the country's environmental movement, according to Bode and Emmert, who call it a *Sternstunde der Umweltbewegung*—a magical moment of the environmental movement (113). Stern did not show cute baby deer—as one might expect for a day when the nation would resound with forest-centric Christmas carols like *Oh Tannenbaum*. Instead, he claimed that the German forest was on its deathbed, accused foresters for having transformed the forest into an unnatural, profit-driven factory for wood and thus having completely reduced its biodiversity, and the hunters for breeding and feeding deer as if they were domesticated animals in order to produce a big yield of the fetishized dead bones with which they like to decorate their walls (see Bode 113; Stahmann 230). He sharply criticized trophy hunting, which eliminates the healthiest animals instead of the sick and weak animals as animal predators would do, and what he called the "Bambi-mentality" spread by the media, which served hunters well since it portrayed them and their system of *Hege* as caretakers and protectors of Germany's beloved forest animals, and by extension, the forest itself. Quoting shocking numbers about the damage caused by deer to trees and protective mountain forests—damage for which the state, i.e. the taxpayers, would be responsible in a system that financed the pleasure pursuits of wealthy hunters—Stern demanded that the hunters end their *Hege* and change their way of hunting so it would be based on biological principles. And that would mean shooting female deer and not just antler-bearing stags and bucks. In addition to these economic and environmental arguments, Stern highlighted and satirized the hunters' euphemistic and mythologizing language—another smoke screen hiding the reality of their violent "sport." In one fell swoop, Stern had destroyed the foresters' and the hunters' good reputation. As a result, the kill quota for cervids was increased, and changes were made to Germany's hunting laws (Klünder 70). In 1975, Stern wrote an open letter to Federal President and hunter Walter Scheel, repeating his pleas to stop forestry and hunting practices that were destroying the forest ecosystem and causing a "dying of

[16] Bernhard Grzimek was zoo-director, author, conservationist, documentary film maker ("Serengeti Shall Not Die"), and TV personality with his popular program *Ein Platz für Tiere* (A Place for Animals), broadcast 175 times during the 1960s - 1980s. He would bring animals, even predators, into the studio and let them climb all over himself. For more information on Grzimek see Lekan, and Huggan.

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the forest from below," as Germany's most hated forester had called it—Georg Sperber, whom Stern had featured in his TV program (Bode and Emmert 114). As a result, President Scheel abolished the state-funded hunting trips for diplomats and other guests of the state (see the letter in Pfau 103).

In his fictional hunting novella, published much later, in 1989, when Stern had already withdrawn from journalism, he presents a more nuanced and complex view of the ethics of hunting as he tells the story of a wealthy banker on a bear hunt in a communist country in Southeastern Europe. His protagonist Joop develops serious doubts about the practice of killing animals and ends up identifying with his prey animal, who is actually a predator like himself. The text contains a sharply satirical scene in which the author presents the deer overpopulation in the forests as a "brothel;" the resulting senescing of a forest where no young trees can grow up; the perversion of the hunters' desire for performing their masculinity through sexualized trophy hunting; but also their deceptive appropriation of the ecological discourse in order to justify their killing of wild animals (124-126). Confronted with the extraordinary beauty of a stag he was permitted to take (in addition to the bear), Joop is unable to pull the trigger. Experiencing the shooting of the old bear as an "execution" in the end completely disrupts his passion and drive for hunting, and he gives it up alltogether (150).[17]

While in his TV program Stern had demanded more hunting based on ecological principles in order to protect forest regeneration, in this fictional text eighteen years later he demonstrates that nothing has changed. In fact, the hunting lobby has now appropriated the ecological discourse in order to justify their pursuit of pleasure and status while not actually reducing deer overpopulation. By presenting every second chapter of the novella from the perspective of the prey animal (though in his case it is a predator and not a game animal), Stern, like Salten, lets his readers experience the life-world of a wild animal in sensuous detail and informed by his extensive knowledge of biology and ethology—such as a bear's keen sense of smell and rich olfactory world. While Salten's *Bambi* was primarily threatened by the human predators in the woods, Stern's animal character is now seriously endangered by the environmental devastation of its habitat in addition to the trophy cult, which includes the animals' pelts. In contrast to Salten's fairly humanized animal character, Stern uses what has been established as a form of "critical anthropomorphism." It is a "limited third-person-point of view also employed by ethologists, ethnographers, and others who aim to be as truthful as possible to actual animal experience" (Weik von Mossner 126). An ethological approach was the basis for Stern's journalism and fictional writing yet he did not want to reproduce the objectifying gaze of science, or of technology-focused official environmental initiatives, since they would not actually reach his audience. Instead, he argued for the "courage" to re-introduce emotion into the human/nature relationship since humans learn best when affect is involved and

[17] For an in-depth analysis of *The Last Hunt*, see Helga G. Braunbeck, "Predators and Prey: Entanglements of Masculinity, Power, and Desire in Horst Stern's Novella *The Last Hunt*."

would, as a result, care more about the fate of plants, animals, and their life-worlds (Stern, "Mut zur Emotion"). This would disrupt humans' alienation from the natural world. Ethology, emotion, and a degree of anthropomorphism are also the basis for a naturalist and environmentalist, who, like Stern half a century before him, is rebelling against mainstream views and conventional practices that destroy forests' ecological balance and resilience: Germany's best-known forester Peter Wohlleben.

Peter Wohlleben

In his analysis of the field of cultural animal studies, Roland Borgards observes that two lines of research are now converging: the scientific field of the New Ethology, and new animal theories that investigate the human-animal relationship and critically revise the anthropological difference, anthropocentrism, and anthropomorphism (Borgards 41-42). New Ethology investigates animal intelligence and sentience with a different approach that does not question what animals can do or feel but instead asks which animals have certain abilities, or how they express specific feelings. He cites Peter Wohlleben's book *Das Seelenleben der Tiere (The Inner Life of Animals)* as a popular collection of evidence. I would argue that already decades before Wohlleben, Horst Stern had popularized this new ethological perspective on animal life, which in some ways uses the methods of zoologist and ethologist Konrad Lorenz, who also based his work on observation rather than experiments in the lab. Meanwhile, new animal theory grants animals agency (Latour), a status as "companion" or "kin" (Haraway), or even personhood (anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, all qtd. in Borgards 44-45). In Borgards' view, the two new lines of research are siblings that both radically question and criticize the anthropological difference. Since anthropocentrism cannot be completely avoided and should not be denied, he, too, argues for its critical integration, along with a critical anthropomorphism based on ethological observation that would lead to richer analyses and go beyond the limitations of how the last three hundred years of Western thought have shaped the human-animal relationship (Borgards 52).

Extending anthropomorphism from animals to plants, as Peter Wohlleben does, starting with his first 2015 bestseller *The Hidden Life of Trees (Das geheime Leben der Bäume)*, is yet another big step that is generally viewed with suspicion (Wankhammer discusses this). However, recent scientific investigations of plant life are finding ever more analogies to human behaviors in the ways in which plants communicate with each other, distinguish between kin and non-kin, warn others about dangers in their environment, or even—seemingly altruistically—"help" each other through difficult times, such as trees when they exchange nutrients via their underground mycorrhizal (fungal) networks. Like Horst Stern, Peter Wohlleben does not do this research himself but communicates the most recent scientific findings, blended with his own observations and anecdotes. He also does this with discernable emotional involvement and appeal to his audience, just as Horst Stern had done—though without Stern's biting satire and sarcasm. Since Wohlleben is a forest ranger,

his primary concern is the health of the complete ecosystem under his care; and, like Horst Stern before him, he has identified a multitude of problems that originate in the ways in which humans interact with and impact Germany's forests. Among them are the profit-driven harvesting of wood and planting of monocultures, the use of huge harvesters compacting and killing sensitive biota in soil structures, and the role of trophy hunting and the hunters' *Hege* that produces an overpopulation of deer. Nearly fifty years after Horst Stern, scientific knowledge about the forest ecosystem and its main inhabitants, the trees, has reached new levels. Wohlleben communicates these scientific findings discovered by forest ecologists such as Canadian scholar Suzanne Simard, who, together with *Nature* magazine, coined the term "wood wide web" for the underground mycorrhizal networks that play such an essential role in how forests function (Simard 165). This term is also, as Johannes Wankhammer explains in his analysis of Wohlleben's anthropomorphic rhetoric, an example for the fact that not all of Wohlleben's metaphors originate from his own linguistic creativity but may actually stem from scientific literature itself (146). Yet, as was to be expected, the German forest establishment reacted sharply, complaining "that Wohlleben's writing style buries the alterity of vegetal life under a heap of anthropomorphizing ascriptions" and criticizing "the conflation of human and non-human domains" (Wankhammer 140, 141). Now that Suzanne Simard's book on *The Mother Tree* is published, a collective of thirty-three international forestry and plant sciences researchers have written a paper in which they reproach both authors for their lack of scientific rigor, undermining of science-based forest management, sullying the image of forestry, and, most of all, for their use of anthropomorphism, which they consider inappropriate even for popular science books (Robinson 2023). What remains is the question whether the positive impacts of Wohlleben's and Simard's books, such as reverting a long-standing marginalization of plants and making them relatable, might not actually outweigh the concerns expressed by the scientists. It certainly wouldn't be the first time in history that disruptive and revolutionary ideas are rejected by the establishment, even in the sciences.

Wohlleben's anthropomorphic writing style likely contributed majorly to the national and international success of his books, and he certainly considers plants and animals to be subjects rather than mere resources for humans. Yet he is also attentive to the fact that state- and privately-owned forests cannot all be nature reserves without human interference—humans are a part of European *natureculture* ecosystems, and forest uses are necessary. So he advocates for changing forestry and hunting practices in ways that would restore the ecosystem that Horst Stern had already diagnosed as being close to death. Some changes would be radical, such as one of his latest views: instead of the increased, biology-driven hunt that Horst Stern had championed, and that in his early years, Wohlleben, too, had demanded, he would now like to explore what happens when there is no hunting at all in large enough areas, and have the effects scientifically assessed (*Waldwissen* 324). For the past eighty years, ever increasing kill quotas for game animals have not succeeded in reducing deer overpopulation and damage to trees—so this is clearly not working

and a new approach is needed (Wohlleben, *Der lange Atem der Bäume* 133; *Waldklimagipfel)*. He cites the Swiss county of Genf as an example, where hunting was forbidden already in 1974, biodiversity returned, deer changed their behavior, and the area has become like a nature reserve—one shared with humans. Wild pigs or boar would still need to be hunted using professional hunters. Wohlleben also demands a change in forestry practices that would avoid the creation of open spaces through wood harvesting, thus making the forests darker again, which would reduce the growth of carbohydrate-rich deer food and thus support forest rejuvenation. No winter feeding or bait sites would be allowed; eventually hunting could become superfluous (*Waldwissen* 211, 322-324). In his latest book, he and his co-author, forest ecologist Pierre Ibisch, do, however, suggest driven hunts once a year as a better alternative to the current system of hunting that instills fear in the animals all year round and drives them into hiding in the forest (323). However, driven hunts with their spectacularity, or the culling of large numbers of wild animals, often face strong public opposition. At the 2022 Forest Climate Summit in Berlin, Wohlleben was the only one with a more global and international perspective, alerting his audience to the contradictory ethics that underlie Europeans' bemoaning the killing of large ocean mammals, such as whales, and large land mammals in Africa, such as elephants, yet nobody seems to mind the killing of millions of Europe's largest mammals year-in and year-out. People in other parts of the world can't understand this, or think it is crazy. Why do Europeans support the creation of nature reserves all over the world but are unable to leave at least some of their forests undisturbed so they could return to a more natural state?

Wohlleben basically advocates for a recalibration of the nature/culture relationship and ecological balance, which would actually bring Germany in line with European laws and goals for more nature reserves and the protection of wild, or creation of rewilded, areas in Europe. As many at the Forest Climate Summit agreed, this would have to start with actual communication between foresters, hunters, farmers, state officials, and conservationists and an alignment of all the laws that govern this into one law with a clear priority of restoring what's left of European "nature."[18] Wohlleben's approach would also fulfil what Jens Soentgen demands: to establish "an ecology of subjects", one that includes emotional goals and the perspectives of non-human living beings (Soentgen 113, 126).

Hunting violently disrupts the peace of the forest, causing distress and fear in the animals and—since 40% of shots fail to kill—physical injury and pain (Wohlleben and Ibisch, *Waldwissen* 208). Whether a no-hunting policy would eventually lead to a self-regulating deer population and more, or less, damage to trees is not clear at this point; as Wohlleben demands, it should be on the research agenda. How the recent return of large carnivores to Central European forest ecosystems—wolves, and in

[18] Dresden university wildlife ecologist Sven Herzog takes a similar approach to finding a solution when he suggests more inclusion and active participation of the various groups and stakeholders. He sees the situation not primarily as an ecological problem but one that humans have created and need to find consensus on how to solve.

some areas bears—might impact deer populations and forest regeneration, is another issue to be considered.[19] However, it is already clear that the hundreds of wolf packs that would be needed to significantly reduce herbivore numbers in German forests would be untenable for the farming community as well as the general public—wolves will not solve the problem.[20] How the climate crisis with its severe droughts will impact long term forest health is yet to be determined, as will be other unforeseeable but potentially impactful environmental factors, such as the chronic wasting disease killing deer and other cervids in the US. It has also been found in Northern European moose and reindeer populations.

Conclusion

All three of the bestseller authors I have discussed care deeply about wild animals and plants and the forest ecosystem and convey their concern about how human civilization has created forest ecosystems with plants and animals that are now in serious distress. By telling their stories about disruptive encounters in the forest—about humans killing deer, and deer (along with humans) killing trees—in an anthropomorphic style they give voice and narrative agency to other-than-human living beings. They evoke empathy and perhaps biophilia in their audience, which may be their real achievement in our human-dominated world that always puts the needs of humans first. It gives cause for hope to think that Salten's, Stern's and Wohlleben's affectively appealing works, which disrupt established cultural and scientific discourses and worldviews, may inspire more discussion and real action toward a future with gentler relations with wild animals and plants. This could be a future in which the destructive Western nature/culture dichotomy might be supplanted by an ontology more akin to that of Indigenous peoples, who, for thousands of years, have managed to combine sustainable forest use with respectful relations with their other-than-human planetary cohabitants.

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[19] For Poland, forest ecology researchers Wójcicki and Boroswski have found that the presence of wolves changes which tree species are browsed and where in the forest this happens (spatial differentiation), and that it influences "the foraging behaviour and browsing of wild herbivores at a fine scale." They also state that the "threat posed by human hunters is thought to be the most important determinant of cervid responses in commercial forests during the day through the hunting season."

[20] American environmental writer Emma Marris discusses how the idea that keystone species and apex predators such as wolves shape an entire ecosystem might actually not be born out in the reality of many ecosystems, that some ecologists have their doubts about it, and that the situation is much more complicated.

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