

Material Ecocriticism and Peter Handke's *Versuch über den Pilznarren*

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Peter Handke's perplexing 2013 text, *Versuch über den Pilznarren: Eine Geschichte für sich* (which I would translate as *Essay about the Mushroom Fool: A Story for Itself*), is the fifth in a series of novel-like essays he began in 1989.¹ Though Handke's idea of a "Pilznarr" (mushroom fool) and the narrator's informal and playful style give the impression of a strange and frivolous topic, I argue that the *Versuch* is a complex investigation that treats the relation between humans and the nonhuman world as one that merits serious consideration. In his depiction of the "Pilznarr," Handke tells a story of mushrooms from the point of view of one human who appears to be uninhibitedly caught up in their world. Handke thus brings to life, within narrative dimensions, some key claims of material ecocriticism: that humans share agency with many nonhuman creatures and forces, and that the boundaries of the human body are porous and allow for what Karen Barad has called "intra-actions", a term increasingly used by materialist scholars like Stacy Alaimo to indicate the entangled agencies of multiple entities or bodies.² In contrast to interpretations that focus on the abstract function of nonhuman nature, my examination of the mushroom trope reveals that Handke's *Versuch* should also be understood as a commentary on the deeply reciprocal relationship between humans and the nonhuman world, which can be contemplated through the lens of material ecocriticism. In analysing Handke's *Versuch über den Pilznarren*, I want to explore the narrative possibilities opened up by considering mushrooms' capacities for agency and meaning making and trace this through the body of

¹ The essays that precede this one are *Versuch über die Müdigkeit* (*Essay about Tiredness*, 1989), *Versuch über die Jukebox* (*Essay about the Jukebox*, 1990), *Versuch über den geglückten Tag* (*Essay about the Successful Day*, 1991), *Versuch über den stillen Ort* (*Essay about the Quiet Place*, 2012).

² This term is preferred by scholars of new materialism because it recognizes the co-constructive process of meaning making.

the “Pilznarr”.³ After providing a brief summary of the novel’s plot and the context for my theoretical approach, I will perform a close reading and interpretation of Handke’s writing focusing on how his *Versuch* depicts human agency, and the human body in particular, as entangled with the nonhuman agency of the mushroom.

In *Versuch über den Pilznarren*, the novel’s nameless first person narrator recounts the life of a childhood friend, referred to only as the “Pilznarr,” and this friend’s lifelong obsession with mushrooms and mushroom collecting. The narrator and his friend both grew up in the same small Austrian village shortly after the Second World War (*Pilznarr* 15). Though the specific location is never stated, the details of the area, such as coniferous forests, pockets of larch trees in the mountains, and a former home for asylum seekers “aus einem nahen slawischen Land” (“from a nearby Slavic country”) that became a collection site for other eager mushroom hunters, all point to it being the southern Austrian province of Carinthia (17, 26). As a child, the “Pilznarr” wandered among mushroom-seeking “clans,” finding prized varieties and selling them at the collection site in order to purchase books (35). The narrator categorizes the “Pilznarr’s” childhood experience with mushrooms as the “Pilznarr’s” first “Pilznarrentum” (mushroom foolishness), followed by the second, more intense phase later in life that forms the centre of the novel.

The “Pilznarr” becomes increasingly obsessed with mushrooms and mushroom hunting until he one day disappears, abandoning his career as a successful international human rights lawyer - a profession that, like mushroom hunting, requires collection and discovery (of evidence) and, like the narrator’s, requires writing and story telling. Before his physical disappearance, the “Pilznarr” becomes detached and distanced from his career and family, eventually losing himself to the world of mushrooms. His disappearance marks a turning point in the essay, after which the narrator attempts to relay the

³ I am grateful for feedback from the reviewers and from participants in the “Material Ecocriticism and German Literature” seminar at the 2015 German Studies Association Conference in Washington, DC and the “Environmental Humanities Day” at the University of Minnesota Duluth in November 2015 who commented on earlier versions of this essay.

events leading up to it in great detail, strengthening the reader's suspicion that the narrator and the "Pilznarr" are one and the same. His slide into the mushroom world and his second bout of mushroom foolishness are sparked by the discovery of his first *Boletus edulis* - the treasured porcini mushroom.

As told by the narrator, the "Pilznarr" arrives at the narrator's home in France at the novel's end, unannounced though not unexpected, and seemingly cured of his "Pilznarrentum".⁴ In his newly purchased suit, he resembles the renowned lawyer he once was. The book ends with the narrator and "Pilznarr" taking a hike to the Auberge du Saint Graal to celebrate the "Pilznarr's" birthday.⁵ At the tavern restaurant the "Pilznarr" is reunited with his wife, in what the narrator describes as a fairy tale ending. Perhaps this is too good to be true, though, since the narrator leaves open the possibility that the "Pilznarr" isn't entirely free of his mushroom obsession: "Aber ist das am Ende nicht zu viel des Märchens? Mag sein: Im Märchen wurde er geheilt. In der Wirklichkeit aber ..." ("But isn't that in the end too much fairy tale? It may be: in the fairy tale he was healed. In reality though ..." 216).

Throughout the novel, mushrooms appear to the otherwise rational and pragmatic "Pilznarr" to be magical beings. The cool-headed narrator, in contrast, initially resists being seduced by this magical view of the fungus. In fact, he surprises himself by taking the topic of mushrooms so seriously, and is shocked to find himself attempting to write the story of the "Pilznarr." He exclaims: "Daß es sogar ernst wird beim Angehen und Niederschreiben einer Sache, welche wohl ganz und gar nichts Weltbewegendes an oder in sich hat" ("That it even becomes serious in considering and writing down a matter that arguably has nothing world-changing by any means at all by or in itself" 7). Nevertheless, it is the narrator who decides to record the

⁴ This change invites comparison with the protagonist of Georg Büchner's *Lenz*.

⁵ Most likely this is Handke's 70th birthday on December 6, 2012. As indicated on the book's final page, Handke wrote the first draft during November and December 2012 and, in excerpt form, the hand-written manuscript appears on the book jacket, as is the case with all the other *Versuche*.

story and who comments on other representations of mushrooms in literature, noting “Daß es überhaupt nicht nur die Pilzliteratur, die Pilzbücher, gibt, sondern eine Literatur, wo einer von den Pilzen im Zusammenhang mit seiner eigenen Existenz erzählt, scheint erst nach den zwei Weltkriegen des vergangenen Jahrhunderts der Fall geworden zu sein” (“That there isn’t just mushroom literature, mushroom books, but also a literature where one tells of mushrooms in connection to one’s own existence, appears to have been the case only after the two World Wars of the past century” 12). This aside from the narrator, which rhetorically situates *Pilzliteratur* (mushroom literature) in a literary and formal context suitable for academic study, reveals, however, that he is not as disconnected from mushrooms as he would like to make himself seem. He laments mushrooms’ limited role, either as “Mordwerkzeuge” (“deadly instrument”) or “Mittel zur, wie sagt man?, ‘Bewußtseinsweiterung’” (“Means to, what is it called?, ‘expansion of consciousness’” 13). His seemingly dismissive attitude towards the psychedelic aspects of mushrooms gives the narrator the authority, as a reliable source, to present the story from an objective distance. Indeed, to allow the reader to come to see mushrooms as part of the same horizon of agencies in which humans exist, the narrator distances himself from a mere trivial representation of mushrooms as a psychedelic substance. Yet, when he is swept up in telling a story about mushrooms, he suddenly undermines his objective distance, suggesting that he and the “Pilznarr” are the same person. The narrator writes:

Nichts von dem allen, weder der Pilzjäger als Held, noch als der Träumer vom vollkommenen Mord, noch als der Vorläufer eines anderen Ich-Bewusstseins, soll in dem "Versuch über den Pilznarren" erzählt werden. Oder, in Ansätzen, vielleicht doch? So oder so: Eine Geschichte wie die seinige, wie die sich ereignet hat, und wie ich sie, zeitweise aus nächster Nähe, miterlebt habe, ist jedenfalls noch keinmal aufgeschrieben worden. (“None of all of that, not the mushroom hunter as hero, nor as dreamer of the perfect murder, nor as the predecessor of a different self-consciousness, should be told in the “Essay about the Mushroom Fool.” Or, to a certain extent, maybe so? Either way: a story such as his, such as it came about, and how I, at times, witnessed it point-blank, has never been written in any case.” 14)

Though he alludes to the possibility of a mind-altering mushroom story with the “vielleicht doch?” (“maybe so?”), he immediately retracts that possibility as plausible. The lines that follow promise a story unlike any that has already been told and therefore as a narrator he purports not to be interested in the psychedelic properties of the mushroom. It should also be noted that with this digression Handke, in part, refers here to a children’s book he had previously written for his daughter, *Lucie im Wald mit dem Dingsda* (*Lucie in the Forest with the Thingy*), whose title references the famous song by The Beatles and its rumoured allusion to LSD. By dismissing the connection to psychedelics in this instance, Handke rejects a pop culture approach to mushrooms and instead challenges the reader to contemplate the material encounter with wild mushrooms and the physical space of the forest where they grow. Instead of examining the self through mind-altering substances, the *Versuch* examines the human self vis-à-vis the nonhuman in the material world.

As a result, the space of mushrooms and mushroom collecting becomes intensely meaningful due to the relation it invokes between the mushroom hunter and the nonhuman surroundings, much as Anna Tsing does in her essay “Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species” (Tsing 141). For the purpose of the present analysis, Tsing’s interpretation of the habitat of mushroom collecting - the “unruly edges” - provides a starting point for understanding the material flows of mushroom collecting. She emphasizes that because most edible mushrooms require damp and shady ground and are likely to be found around the edges of the forest, harvesting wild mushrooms for personal and commercial use evades industrial modes of production. As a result, Tsing concludes that small-scale commercial mushroom collection exposes the “seams of global capitalism” or the places in which the commodity (wild mushrooms in this case) cannot be controlled and where different forms of knowledge and a slower speed of labour are valued (Tsing 142).

Indeed, the act of collecting places specific bodily demands on the mushroom collector because she must walk slowly and scan the area around her to find the mushrooms hidden on the forest floor. This, however, is no place to search for utopia. Despite the collector’s

careful attention to a specific environment, Tsing reminds her readers that “[i]mmersion in this space does not remove one from the world of capital, class, and regulation. Yet “*noticing the seams* is a place to begin” (152; original emphasis). Successful mushroom collecting depends on the collector’s knowledge of the terrain and of the multi-species interactions that take place there. In Handke’s *Versuch*, the forest is the starting position for the “Pilznarr” when he loses himself to the mushrooms and the space in which dynamic interaction between humans and the nonhuman morph into intra-action. I argue that the “Pilznarr’s” search for mushrooms begins with over-activated sensory awareness in the course of his activity in the forest, and that this eventually affects his entire body as he becomes entangled with nonhuman agencies. Such mind-body awareness yields to a loss of individual self that the narrator then chronicles as the “Pilznarr’s” disappearance.

Though Tsing’s essay on mushroom collecting examines the relations between mushroom collector and mushroom, she does not focus on interspecies interaction beyond biotic entities and thus leaves out material agencies that could deepen the analysis. By acknowledging such material agencies - that is, the capacity of matter to produce meaning in its own right or through intra-action with other human and nonhuman agencies - Stacy Alaimo’s concept of trans-corporeality can be used to expand on Tsing’s observations to consider the material flows between the human mushroom collector and the nonhuman realm. Trans-corporeality extends the idea of embodiment beyond the human sphere and applies it to all exchanges, including those across human, nonhuman, and material bodies and within “economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial” networks (“States” 276). Alaimo initially established the concept of trans-corporeality in her 2010 book *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self*, but since then the idea has undergone many iterations and applications. Her basic definition established the fundamental principle that

Because the material self cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial, what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a

swirling landscape of uncertainty where practices and actions that were once not even remotely ethical or political matters suddenly become so. (“Oceanic” 187)

Thus, in a time when the “environment” is often treated as separate from humans and their actions, this sense of entanglement supports the views of other scholars of material ecocriticism who claim that the human is always co-constructed with its environment and the two cannot be separated. When the material world cannot be separated from something as familiar as the human body, trans-corporeality becomes more profound, as Alaimo explains, “...thinking across bodies may catalyse the recognition that the environment, which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims and actions” (*Bodily* 2). Here Alaimo references Karen Barad’s concept of intra-action in order to point out both that humans are not the only actors in the world and that material entities affect humans greatly: “Trans-corporeality not only traces how various substances travel across and within the human body but how they *do* things - often unwelcome or unexpected things” (*Bodily* 146; original emphasis). As a result of taking other-than-human factors into account in this way, the world of the human becomes unstable when the political and ethical dimensions of trans-corporeality become clear; humans make decisions and take action “within an ever-changing landscape of continuous interplay, intra-action, emergence, and risk” (*Bodily* 21).

Along the Seams: Boundaries, Borders, and Bodies in Handke

Turning from Alaimo’s concepts of the material flows across bodies to Handke, the “seams of capitalism” discussed above play an important role in the life of the “Pilznarr” in terms of the many thresholds explored in the novel. The “Pilznarr’s” childhood experience with mushrooms was, as previously mentioned, directly related to commerce because he collected mushrooms in order to earn money to buy books. Given that the two protagonists (the “Pilznarr” and the narrator) grew up in the era directly following the Second World

War, during which Austria experienced the rapid growth of the economy, trade and commerce became important for the young “Pilznarr,” for whom wild mushrooms were the only currency available (*Pilznarr* 15-16). This pragmatic reality situates the “Pilznarr” on the margins of the emerging capitalist economy as well as on the geopolitical border of capitalism - between Austria and socialist Slovenia, which was part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia following the war. Handke himself grew up in this threshold space, because his mother belonged to the Slovenian-speaking minority in Carinthia.⁶

In taxonomic terms, fungi as a kingdom are also situated on the border. Neither plant nor animal, their underground networks are still not entirely understood. Given this unique status, the “Pilznarr’s” belief that mushrooms are the last frontier, though perhaps overly effusive, should not be read as hyperbole. The narrator reflects on his friend’s stance:

Die Pilze als ‘das letzte Abenteuer’? Für den Pilznarren sonnenklar, denn er gebrauchte das Wort in der Nachfolge der ‘Last Frontier’, der ‘Letzten Grenze’ hin zur Wildnis, die Grenze, hinter der zumindest noch ein Zipfel Wildnis zu entdecken war. (The mushrooms as ‘the last adventure’? For the mushroom fool it was clear as day, because he used the word in emulation of the ‘Last Frontier’, the ‘last border’ into the wilderness, behind which there was at least still a tip of wilderness to be discovered. 144)

With these references to frontiers and borders, Handke situates mushrooms in a liminal space, while also alluding to a number of deeper, cultural meanings, as he comments on the rapidly deteriorating state of the environment. The Last Frontier suggests a parallel with Cold War era rhetoric concerning the space race between the

⁶ Christoph Parry details this in “Von Ahnen und Enklaven: Staat und Heimat bei Peter Handke” (“On Ancestry and Enclaves: Nation and Heimat in Peter Handke”). His personal background can also be considered in the narrator’s depiction of himself as a *Flüchtling* (refugee) in *Lucie im Wald mit dem Dingsda* (*Lucie in the Forest with the Thingy*). His mother’s suicide is fictionally detailed in his novella *Wunschloses Unglück* (*A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*).

United States and Soviet Union. Simultaneously, the Last Frontier also references Alaska, a place valued for its supposed pristine nature unexplored by humans (a view that, like so many, ignores the history of the many indigenous peoples who occupied the land). The narrator continues:

Diese Grenze gab es längst nicht mehr, weder in Alaska noch sonstwo, schon gar nicht im Himalaya. Das letzte Abenteuer hingegen gab es, noch, wer weiß wie lange noch, auch wenn man von ihm nur den Zipfel eines Zipfels zu fassen bekam. ("This border had long since ceased to exist, either in Alaska or somewhere else, even in the Himalayas. The last adventure, however, still existed, who knows how long still, even if one only got to grasp the tip of the tip of it." 144)

The narrator's recognition that wilderness no longer exists even in Alaska signals a critical and contemporary understanding of nature. This observation stands in sharp contrast to the descriptions of nature in Handke's 1979 novel *Langsame Heimkehr* (*Slow Homecoming*) in which the protagonist, an Austrian geologist, completes fieldwork in the far northern regions of Alaska in seeming isolation. The detailed descriptions of landscape in *Langsame Heimkehr* are based on Handke's own travels to the region and reflect a notion of pristine nature. In the more than thirty years that separate the two texts, Handke's view of nature clearly shifts and becomes more aligned with the contemporary perspective which recognizes that we now live in the Anthropocene, a geologic era distinguished by humans' influence on the nonhuman environment on a planetary scale. Thus the view of nature that Handke evokes in *Versuch über den Pilznarr* anticipates the concept of nature in the Anthropocene proposed by environmentalists, environmental historians, earth scientists and scholars in the environmental humanities today: there is no longer a "Nature" untouched by humans.⁷ Nonetheless, in Handke's *Versuch*, there is one unclassifiable form of life that continues to exist in a wild state, namely mushrooms.

⁷ See Bill McKibben, William Cronon, Timothy Morton, and Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer.

As our definition of “nature” evolves to fit into a world without wilderness, scholars have been forced to reconsider the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world. Combining the literary analytical tools of ecocriticism with theories of new materialism, material ecocriticism offers a way to understand the significance of the nonhuman by expanding the field of agency to include all matter. This framing sheds light on the complex processes that make up the world, and the meaning produced by each instance of entanglement between people, animals, things and the environment. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann describe the intra-action between non-human matter and narration, recognizing that humans’ role in the complex and dynamic entanglements of the world exposes the need for new modes of representation:

If matter is agentic, and capable of producing its own meanings, every material configuration, from bodies to their contexts of living, is ‘telling,’ and therefore can be the object of a critical analysis aimed at discovering its stories, its material and discursive interplays, its place in a ‘choreography of becoming.’ (“Material Ecocriticism” 79)

Similarly, in his *Versuch* Handke portrays the complex entanglement of the “Pilznarr” with the nonhuman mushrooms when the human shifts from subject to object and the act of mushroom collecting is described with a focus on the mushroom instead of the human. The reader sees, for example, that when the “Pilznarr” finds his first porcini mushroom, its presence seems to jump out and take him by surprise even though he is actively searching for it: “Oho! Sieh da!: Es war ihm, als habe er, ohne es zu wissen, auf diesen Augenblick, das Ansichtigwerden, auf diese Begegnung und dieses Zusammentreffen gewartet” (“Oh! Look there!: It seemed to him, as if he, without knowing it, had waited for this moment, the becoming visible, for this encounter and this coming together” 68). The exclamation “Oho!” signals his surprise - despite having his eyes glued to the forest floor, he is startled by the encounter with the mushroom, in the same way someone would be when unexpectedly running into another person. Described as an encounter - *eine Begegnung* - this discovery of the porcini mushroom does not depend solely on the “Pilznarr” and, instead, requires a coming together of the human and non-

human. The intensity of the moment is additionally heightened by Handke's use of the word "Zusammentreffen", which indicates a meeting together. The moment of the encounter is described as an "Augenblick" and is both temporal - an instant - and references the gaze of the "Pilznarr;" it is as if he waited for this moment in time for his gaze to meet a porcini mushroom. Moreover, the doubling of terminology that occurs when Handke inserts the antiquated and elevated formulation of "Ansichtigwerden" (becoming visible) alludes to the process of the mushroom becoming visible in a way that indicates a process of emergence; the "Pilznarr" doesn't find the mushroom, rather the mushroom becomes visible to his gaze - hence he, too, is acknowledged by the mushroom in that "Augenblick".

Indeed, as the reader subsequently learns, the "Pilznarr" sees mushrooms as beings and he refers to each individual one as "ein Wesen" (a being); terms such as "Ding" or "Sache" (thing or object) fail to represent the complexity of the mushroom for him.⁸ Later, he takes issue with being called a mushroom hunter, since in his mind the mushrooms clearly hunt him: "Ich, der Jäger? I wo, ich der von den Pilzen Gejagte!" ("Me, the hunter? No way, I am the one hunted by the mushrooms!" 192). That sense of being hunted or pursued by mushrooms, and thus surrendering agency to the mushrooms, is further reflected in Handke's unexpected formulation "fündig werden" (literally to become fruitful in finding) to describe his successful ventures into the forest. Analogous to striking gold, "fündig werden" also has its origins in stumbling upon a valuable resource in mining. By using it instead of 'finden' (to find), 'erfahren' (to find out about), or 'entdecken' (to discover), Handke emphatically distances the protagonist from the act of discovery and thus acknowledges that his agency is contingent upon that of the mushroom.

As per Tsing's description of the optimal location for mushrooms on the seams of global capitalism, Handke's mushrooms in this essay

⁸ Compare this with *Lucie im Wald mit dem Dingsda*, in which mushrooms are never named outright and are referred to instead as the *Dingsbums*, *Krimskrams*, and so on. Brady concerns himself with naming in his article: "'Der Bleistift roch nach Rosmarin': The Art of Foraging in Stifter, Handke, and Beuys" (73).

resist being cultivated or bred for mass consumption.⁹ This trait further defines them as a last frontier or last adventure. “Indem sie nämlich die inzwischen einzigen Gewächse auf Erden waren, welche sich nicht und nicht züchten, nicht und nicht zivilisieren, geschweige denn domestizieren ließen; welche einzig wild wuchsen, unbeeinflussbar von gleichwelchem menschlichen Eingriff” (“As they were, namely, by now the only plants on earth that resist cultivation, civilization, let alone domestication; which grew wild, unable to be influenced by whatever human intervention” 144). In this description, the mushrooms appear as agents of resistance. Not only did they remain, for the “Pilznarr,” “unbeeinflussbar” (unable to be influenced) by human intervention; the verb *lassen* indicates that they *do not let themselves* be bred, cultivated or domesticated. As Tsing writes in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, wild mushrooms offer an alternative, “when the controlled world we thought we had fails” (2).

Prized for their ability to withstand human control, wild mushrooms thus differ sharply from those that can be domesticated. The “Pilznarr” lists the many different types of mushrooms that can be grown and cultivated - the oyster mushrooms, enokitake, field mushrooms, cloud ear mushrooms, and honey fungus. Yet these tame varieties are, in his words, only a *trompe-l'oeil*, tricking both the eye, and the rest of the senses as well (145). The “Pilznarr’s” body is not intertwined with the commercial varieties of mushrooms in the way it is with wild mushrooms; commercially produced mushrooms do not yield the connection between the mushroom, land, and body that is essential in the act of collecting wild mushrooms in the woods. By collecting wild mushrooms in the forest, the human body of the collector enters a different space and must become attuned to the dark forest floor. The border between human and nonhuman space is manifested in the “Pilznarr’s” workspace turned sanctuary, his “Zwischenraum” (in-between, space between).¹⁰ From inside the

⁹ This rarity of wild mushrooms also makes them more valued.

¹⁰ The concept of “Zwischenraum” will be familiar to Handke scholars, bringing to mind the title of his 1990 book-length interview with Herbert Gamper, *Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenräumen (But I Live Only from the In-between Spaces)*.

building, he can see out, but people hiking the forest can only see the large fence, “welche seinen Zwischenraum von der Außenwelt trennte” (“which divided his in-between space from the outside world” 108). In labelling this space *Zwischenraum*, Handke creates both a physical liminal space and a temporal one that the “Pilznarr” inhabits, distinguishing the before and after of his disappearance.

Nonhuman Agency and Trans-corporeality in the Forest

In Handke’s novel, the physical boundaries of the human body are dissolved, revealing the complex processes taking place around and across this boundary. Much like the porousness Alaimo describes in elucidating her concept of trans-corporeality, the “Pilznarr” loses himself in the forest; when physically caught in a violent storm among falling branches or when lightning strikes he feels no fear because “...er gehörte dazu” (“he belonged to it” 177). We can trace the multiple levels of the porous body in Handke’s *Versuch* first through the takeover of the “Pilznarr’s” senses by the mushrooms he searches for and which then transfers to the demands placed on the physical body in the act of searching for mushrooms. These demands are placed on the gaze and stance of the searcher. The senses and physical body reach a point of entanglement with the nonhuman world in which they cannot be neatly differentiated from one another and as such, the human body dissolves. In the novel this manifests clearly when the “Pilznarr” disappears.

As a child he was initially driven into the woods for monetary reasons. As an adult the arresting light of the yellow mushrooms growing from the dark forest floor motivates him. Surprisingly, taste and consumption hold little meaning for the “Pilznarr,” though the act of eating and the sense of taste are readily associated with mushrooms and mushroom collecting. Though certainly present in the *Versuch*, consumption per se does not play as great a role as would be the case in a collector’s guide to mushrooms. The “Pilznarr” contemplates eating when he asks, “Und ist es nicht seltsam, wie eine Nahrung aus dem tiefsten Erdreich den Kopf himmelwärts heben kann?” (“And isn’t it strange, how sustenance from the deepest soil can lift the head skywards?” 149). However, instead of the gustatory pleasure of

mushrooms, Handke's *Versuch* emphasizes the act and place of searching rather than either the need for or the enjoyment of food.

Like the truffle pigs and dogs that sniff out the prized fungus, the "Pilznarr's" senses are hyperactivated: "Alle Sinne wurden wach" ("All senses were awoken" 109).¹¹ The "Pilznarr's" senses were first engaged in the forest during his childhood when he collected mushrooms. Later in the novel, Handke depicts a specific wooded landscape whose aesthetic function seems to situate him in the worn literary tradition of nature poetry, which the writer ultimately rejects, signalling a departure from the romanticized ideal of nature. The descriptions of the trees' entanglement mirrors the "Pilznarr's" entwinement with the mushroom world; as the "Pilznarr" moves further into the forest, he loses his sight in the thick woods. The reader can trace the young "Pilznarr's" movement as he leaves the liminal space between civilization and the forest and enters the depths of the woods; "Von den Säumen in die Tiefe und dann in das Innerste der Wälder" ("from the seams into the deep and then into the innermost parts of the forest" 17). Handke playfully alludes to the senses through the natural imagery and the contrast between darkness and light:

Die Wälder der Kindheitsgegend waren vor allem Nadelwälder... und diese Bäume wuchsen jeweils nah beieinander, die Äste und Zweige ineinander verzahnt und verflochten, und finster und finsterer wurde es beim Hineintauchen zwischen all dem Fichtengewirr, so daß mit der Zeit weder Einzelbäume noch ganzer Wald sinnfällig wurden... ("The forests of the region of his childhood were first and foremost coniferous forest... and these trees each grew close together, the branches and twigs interlocked and

¹¹ The following passage describes how the "Pilznarr's" senses are dominated by the sight and smell of the mushrooms in a way that further emphasizes the mushrooms as beings and as capable of confronting the "Pilznarr;" "Und obwohl er sich dessen nie sicher war, wurde er ein jedes Mal fündig. Ein jedes Mal? Ja, ein jedes Mal. Und jeder Fund bescherte ihm eine Überraschung, ein ungeahntes Ding-Wesen, einen neuen Ort, Farbton, Formakzent, Geruch" ("And although he was never sure of it, he made a find every single time. Every single time? Yes, every single time. And each find bestowed unto him a surprise, an unforeseen thing-being, a new place, colour, accent of form, smell" 109).

intertwined, and it became dark and darker in plunging into the entanglements of spruces so that, gradually, neither single trees nor the entire forest became evident” 17-18).

The increasing darkness brings with it a certain blindness and with the elimination of visual perception comes the threat of the loss of self. That the area is described as “ortlos” (placeless) in addition to “finster” (dark) signals an unfamiliarity of place, which results from entering the labyrinthine space of the mushrooms in the forest. The correlation of darkness with a loss of sight is conveyed with the word “sinnfällig”- able to be apprehended by the senses, an ability removed by the darkness created by the density of trees.

The passage continues, describing the innermost parts of the forest, where it was “am finstersten und ortlosesten” (“darkest and most placeless” 18). Surrounded by trees and tangled branches, the “Pilznarr” juxtaposes the darkness of the forest—the space of mushrooms - with the light located on the other side in the space of humans:

...kein Durchblick mehr zwischen den Stämmen mit den in der Regel toten unteren Ästen hinaus in das eben noch ihn umgebende Freie, in das eben noch das weite Land bestrahlende Tageslicht, als Licht nur ein gleichbleibendes tiefes Dämmern, welches nirgends als Licht wirksam wurde, nicht bloß “kaum ein Hauch” in den (unsichtbaren) Wipfeln, sondern gar keiner, vom Vogelgesang vor ein paar Schritten zu schweigen. (“...no longer a view between the trunks with the usually dead lower branches out into the still free space around him, into daylight that illuminates the land, as a light only a constant, deep dawn, which became effective nowhere as a light, not just ‘barely a breeze/breath’ in the (unseeable) treetops, but rather none at all to be silent from the birdsong a few paces back” 17-18).

Beyond simply being a light in the darkness, the light outside the forest is enduringly illuminating, “ein gleichbleibendes tiefes Dämmern” (a constant, deep dawn), suggesting an optimistic promise, which becomes important in the novel’s end. Foreshadowing the “Pilznarr’s” eventual disappearance, the light of the “beyond” remains inaccessible to him because he cannot see through the twisted branches; once again evoking the sense of sight, the “Pilznarr” has “kein Durchblick mehr” (no longer a view).

By including “kaum ein Hauch” (barely a breeze/breath) toward the end of the passage, the text evokes the full range of the senses and, with this obvious reference to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s poem “Wanderers Nachtlied” (“Wanderer’s Night song”), invites comparison with the long tradition of nature poems, epitomized by the poetry of German Romanticism. The “Hauch” (breeze or breath) can be heard as a sound, felt as a light breeze and seen in the movement of trees. In Goethe’s famous poem, the “Hauch” is felt - barely - and it is seen in the treetops from the narrator’s perspective, looking out from a high location across mountain peaks (“Über allen Gipfeln”). In Handke’s work by contrast, the young “Pilznarr” is deep within the dark forest and the treetops remain “unsichtbar” (un-seeable). The “schweigen” (remaining silent) of the birds in Goethe’s poem adds to the stillness promised to the reader at the end. For Handke, the absence of the bird’s song represents the elimination of another sensory stimulus as the “Pilznarr” loses himself within the forest.

Ultimately a light in the dark woods catches the “Pilznarr’s” eye and redirects his gaze to the forest floor and to the yellow glow of a mushroom. The calm promised in Goethe’s poem (“Warte nur balde, / Ruhest du auch” “Just wait, soon / you will rest too”) is replaced for the “Pilznarr” by being made a fool:

Eine Art Licht kam dafür von dem, was auf dem Waldboden, manchmal halb im Moos dort versteckt, zu finden war. Je öfter das Kind in die Finsterwälder vorstieß, desto mehr wurde es empfangen von jenem Licht, noch bevor es überhaupt fündig geworden war, ja, lange bevor, und immer wieder auch, wenn in der Folge die Fundstelle sogar völlig ausblieben - von dem Licht im Moos war es dann also regelrecht genarrt worden. (“A type of light came instead from that, which was to be found on the forest floor, sometimes half covered in moss there. The more often the child advanced into the dark forests, the more he was received from that light, even before the child ever made a find, yes, long before, and always again and again, even when the place of discovery was completely missing - he had been downright mocked by the light in the moss” 18).

The change in the direction of the gaze represents a crucial moment for the “Pilznarr.” Looking down at the forest floor changes the

stance of the body and he is arrested by the light of the mushroom. Here the passive linguistic formulation “desto mehr wurde es empfangen von jenem Licht” (the more the child was received from that light) mirrors the passivity of the “Pilznarr” in being caught up by the light, as does the phrase “fündig werden” (to become successful in finding). Returning to Alaimo, in her article exploring the concept of trans-corporeality in aquatic environments, she argues that trans-corporeality offers “...a sense that the human is held, but not held up, by invisible genealogies and a maelstrom of often imperceptible substances that disclose connections between humans and the sea” (“States” 478). In this example and throughout Handke’s text, the “Pilznarr” is repeatedly arrested by the presence of mushrooms, as Alaimo’s theory would predict.

A subsequent passage similarly plays with the role of sight and how the mushroom hunter’s downward gaze affects the physical body; “Das Pilzesuchen, überhaupt das Suchen, lasse den Blickkreis, das Blickfeld zusammenschnurren zum bloßen Blickpunkt. Blick? Blicklosigkeit. Und was machen die zu Boden gehefteten Augen noch für einen schweren Kopf, und wie wurden die Augen trüb...” (“Searching for mushrooms, searching in the first place, lets the circle of vision, the field of vision, shrivel together into one mere point of vision. Vision? Visionless-ness. And what a heavy head do eyes glued to the ground make, and how murky the eyes become...” 200). With his gaze glued to the ground, the “Pilznarr’s” entire body becomes heavy and with eyes murky from the dark forest, he fails to see what is in front of him.

This reaches a climax when one day in the height of his mushroom foolishness, he fails to recognize his wife when he encounters her in the forest, and instead sees only the prized Caesar’s mushrooms she holds in her hands. The narrator describes the encounter: “er blickte tatsächlich von dem Pilzkaiser auf und in ihr, seiner Frau, Angesicht. Aber er erkannte sie nicht, bewunderte sie nur, als Fremde, mehr wegen ihres Funds den aufgrund ihrer Schönheit” (“he actually gazed up from the Caesar’s mushroom and into her, his wife’s, face. But he did not recognize her, instead he marvelled at her, as a stranger, more due to her discovery than because of her beauty” 182). With his gaze fixed downward he first sees only the mushroom she

carried and when he does look her in the face – *Angesicht* - the reader is reminded of the play on words with the “Ansichtigwerden” (becoming visible) of the “Pilznarr’s” first porcini, suggesting that he doesn’t actually recognize her. Once healed of his mushroom madness he is reunited with his wife, and proof of his recovery comes when his gaze meets her face, “...und diesmal blickte er nicht auf das Ding in ihrem Arm, sondern in ihr Gesicht, und erkannte die wieder” (“...and this time he didn’t glance at the thing in her arm, but rather into her face, and recognized her again” 215). This time, Handke distances the “Pilznarr” from that first porcini by using the term “Gesicht” for face instead of “Angesicht”, which echoes the “Ansichtigwerden” of his encounter with mushrooms.

At this point in the text Handke plays with language when describing how the body and senses become entangled with the act of discovering mushrooms:

Die Augenhöhe, jetzt, sie war eine beschreibliche. ‘Ja, da schau her!’ Die Sache, das Ding ihm vor Augen, zugleich ihm im Auge, sie, es, war beschreiblich. Aber sie, es selbst hatte keinen Namen, wenigstens keinen, der, im Augenblick, auf es, sie zutraf. Sogar ‘Ding’ oder ‘Sache’, diese Wörter, sie trafen es nicht. ‘Nicht lachen!’ so mein Freund dann zu mir... (“The eye level, now, it was a describable one. ‘Well look there!’ The thing, the object in front of his eyes, at the same moment in his eye, the object, the thing, was describable. But the object, the thing, itself had no name, at least none that in this moment applied to the thing, the object. Even ‘object’ or ‘thing’, these words, didn’t meet it. ‘Don’t laugh!’ my friend said to me...” 67).

In describing how the “Pilznarr” finds his first porcini mushroom, Handke repeatedly places the emphasis on eyes and sight and connects these to the body in relation to the mushroom, reflecting the body’s position in the forest. In the first instance, “[d]ie Augenhöhe” (the eye level), connects the eye with the rest of the body, evoking the particular placement and stance of the body in the art of searching for mushrooms with the collector’s head tilted and eyes glued to the earth. In the second and third iterations, “ihm vor Augen, zugleich ihm im Auge” (“in front of his eyes, at the same moment in his eye”) the mushroom is the subject of the sentence. The “Pilznarr”

does not see them; instead, as the indirect object, the mushrooms appear to him. Yet, at the same time they appear “*im Auge*” - in his eye. The figure of speech, which provokes the reader into thinking about the literal sense, becomes more meaningful when we read it in the context of trans-corporeality. With the word “Augenblick” (moment, blink of an eye), Handke connects a temporal quantity, the blink of an eye, with the body. Broken down into its component parts ‘Augen’ and ‘Blick’ again emphasize the mushroom collector’s unique downward gaze.

Moreover, the “Pilznarr” fails to find the language to describe his encounter. The “Pilznarr’s” complete obsession is revealed, and his outcry “Nicht lachen!” (“Don’t laugh!”) commands both the narrator as well as the reader not to mock his earnest consideration of mushrooms. The position of the eye level and the mushroom are deemed “describable” (though *unbeschreiblich*/indescribable is the more commonly used term), but his grasping at words (is it a “Ding” or a “Sache”?) indicates that language fails him in contemplating mushrooms. Finally, however, the right word for them comes from within him: “Ich nahm es, für den Moment, als etwas Namenloses wahr, oder wenn ich einen Namen dafür hatte, dann, in einem stillen Ausruf, in meinem Innern: ‘Ein Wesen!’” (In that moment, I perceived it to be something nameless, or if I had a name for it, then, in a quiet inwardly cry: ‘A being!’” 67). Compared with “thing” or “object,” “a being” more accurately describes mushrooms as having agentic capacity.

The overload of his senses in the forest combined with the pressures on the body connected to his gaze force a dissolution of the material self. In the following passage, Handke depicts the loss of the self through a clever word play: “Damals aber... nahm er, zeitweise, nicht nur teil – er wurde Teil” (“At that time however, he didn’t just take part at times, he became part” 110). The play on ‘*teilnehmen*’ (to participate or literally, to take part) and ‘*Teil werden*’ (to become part) implies the loss of self as he becomes part of the material flows. The “Pilznarr” and his body become part of the forest as he leaves the path:

Immer wieder geschah es ihm, nein, stieß es ihm zu, daß er auf den oder jenen draußen auf dem Weg überging, so wie er einst an den Waldrändern übergegangen war in das Sausen, Brausen und Röhren des Zweig- und Astwerks übergegangen als Ganzer, mit Haut, Haaren und insbesondere Knochen, in das Sichwiegen, Sichüberlagern, Sichauseinanderspreizen, Sichneuzusammenfinden der Baumkronen” (“Again and again it occurred to him, no, it befell him, that he crossed over some or the other path outside, as he had once crossed over the edges of the forest into the whistling, the roaring, and the bellowing of the twig and branch work as a whole, with skin, hair and in particular bones, into the weighing of the self, the overlaying of the self, the forcing apart of the self, the finding of the self anew of the treetops” 110-111).

The repeated imagery of the rustling forest is visual and aural - “das Sausen und Brausen” - and the connection between his senses and the body is clearly emphasized with the reference to his skin, hair and bones. Once again, the narrator corrects the words he chooses; instead of the verb ‘geschehen’ (to occur, to come about), he uses ‘zustoßen’ (to befall someone), which retains the meaning of the word while also indicating a sudden movement or appearance with the verb stoßen (to push or to thrust).

The repetition of “Sich-” evokes the reflexive pronoun and draws the reader’s attention to the self while the reference to skin, hair and bones reinforces the presence of the material self - the body. While the physical body enters the forest, a transformation of the self is revealed in the four compound nouns beginning with “Sich-” that demonstrate the “Pilznarr’s” disappearance and eventual reappearance. *Sichwiegen* can mean both weighing oneself and swaying. The first meaning points to a taking stock of his life,¹² and the second mimics the movement of the treetops. *Sichüberlagern* indicates an overlay of his self into another place. The last two gesture toward a violent tearing apart (*Sichauseinander-spreizen*) and then a coming back together in a new con-figuration (*Sichneuzusammenfinden*), that suggests that the “Pilznarr” may eventually be cured of his mushroom foolishness.

¹² Cf. “In den Wäldern gewann er sein Maß” (“In the woods he obtained his mass” *Pilznarr* 98).

Meanwhile, Handke has included numerous symbolic representations of mushrooms taking over the body and the senses that further emphasize the body as the location of material flows. The “Pilznarr’s” body comprises a narrative dimension. His obsession can be read on his body, for instance, in his fingernails, which “waren nicht mehr zu säubern von der Walderde, so tief hatte die sich da hineingemischt” (“were no longer able to be cleaned of the forest soil, so deeply they been mixed in” 174).¹³ His permanently soiled fingernails indelibly represent his entanglement with the nonhuman world. Mushrooms even affect his unconscious self: “Im Traum wuchsen ihm Pilze am eigenen Leib, nicht etwa die üblichen, chronischen, welche Gesundheitsschäden anzeigten, sondern Waldpilze, die gesuchtesten, begehrtesten, appetitlichsten” (“In a dream mushrooms grew on his own body, but not the normal, chronic ones, which indicate damage to one’s health, but rather forest mushroom, the ones most sought after, most desired, most appetizing” 180-181). Handke, though mindful of fungal infections, indicates that the mushrooms growing on the “Pilznarr’s” body in his dream were the wild ones he treasured.

At the height of his obsession the “Pilznarr” only has eyes for mushrooms. The narrator explains, “Wenn er dann überhaupt noch Augen für etwas hatte, so nur für [die Pilze]” (“If he even had eyes for something, then only for the mushrooms” 180). By this point, everything appears to him as mushrooms - from smoke rising from neighbouring houses, to the gold, frankincense and myrrh carried by the Three Wise Men, and even constellations in the sky. His sense of sight is exclusively dedicated to mushrooms. After his disappearance when he abruptly reappears at the narrator’s house, the narrator notices that his fingernails are finally clean: “Auch ich habe ein Auge für Einzelheiten, obwohl für andere als er, und so bemerkte ich, daß

¹³ Compare with the father in *Lucie* who also always has dirty fingernails; “Ihr Vater konnte Lucie eher nur leidtun. Er hatte ständig schmutzige Fingernägel, mochte er sich diese auch bürsten, soviel er wollte” (“Her father could only feel rather sorry for Lucie. He constantly had dirty fingernails, even if he brushed them as much as he wanted” *Lucie* 11).

seine Fingernägel nicht mehr durchwirkt von Schwarz waren...” (“Even I have an eye for details, though for different details than him, and so I noticed, that his fingernails were no longer wrought with black...” 196). The clean fingernails point to being healed from his mushroom madness, yet the parallel formulation of “having an eye for something” echoes the narrator’s earlier description of the “Pilznarr” who only has eyes for mushrooms. Though he tries to distance himself from the “Pilznarr” with the caveat “obwohl für andere als er” (“though for different details than him”), he nevertheless draws attention to the similarities between them, confirming the reader’s suspicion that the “Pilznarr” and narrator are, indeed, one and the same.

In the end, the “Pilznarr” says to the narrator that his is not a story worth telling: “die Pilze und er, das sei keine Geschichte wert” (“The mushrooms and he, that isn’t worth a story” 199). However, as the *Versuch*’s subtitle states, the tale is “eine Geschichte für sich” (“a story for itself”). In this sense, mushrooms *are* magic; it is through their narrative potential that Handke realizes his *Versuch* in the meaning of the word as an attempt or experiment. In narrating the human and nonhuman entanglements of mushroom collecting, Handke presents a complex picture of human and nonhuman intra-action that seems to anticipate the importance of matter that material ecocriticism highlights.

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