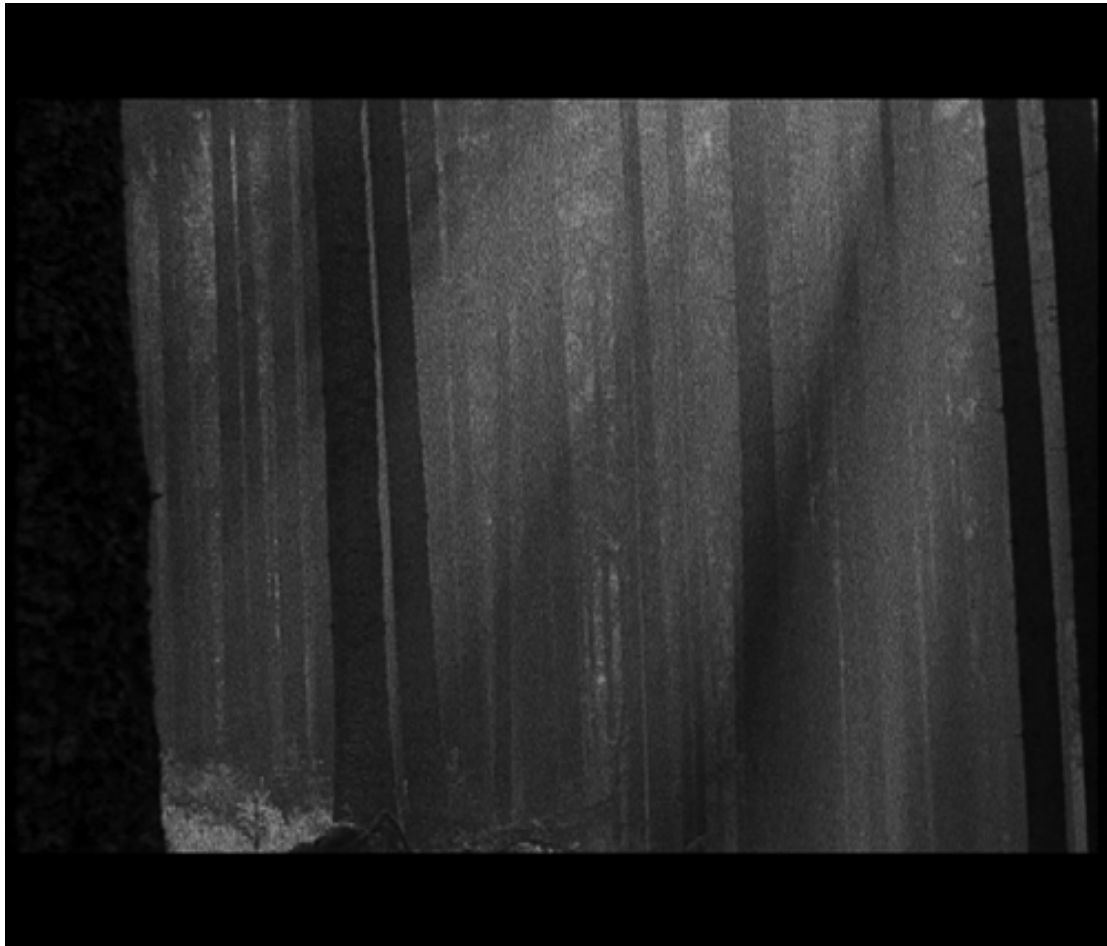


A Path through the Woods: Remediating Affective Landscapes in Documentary Asylum Worlds

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Roads and pathways create connections and enable travel. In contrast, the German word “*Holzweg*” identifies a “path through the woods” that leads to a dead-end. In its literal meaning, it refers to an actual path or transport corridor for logged trees—a path that abruptly ends, winding up in the impenetrable thicket of the forest. But as metaphor, *Holzweg* implies an idea, a practice, a life path or a situation that leads nowhere.¹ Throughout German history, forests have played a central role, both as the

¹ Hence the term “auf dem Holzweg sein” and “sich auf einen Holzweg begeben”—to embark on a path through the woods that may lead to confusion. See also Luther’s use of the idiom in his “Tischreden” (Grimm 1984). In his collection of writings, *Holzwege*, Martin Heidegger invokes the term as a metaphor for a form of thinking that is in transit and resists the philosophical tendency to seek mastery over its concepts and objects of knowledge. Although, like the actual logging path, this thinking may seem to go nowhere, it steps off the beaten tracks and leads to the tangled thickets and core of the forest—and in the moment of revelation enables a different relation to being (Heidegger 1950).

locus of a romanticized origin myth of national identity and as the material site for building the nation's infrastructures and economies (Schama 1995, Scott 1998, Canetti 1984, Linke 1999b, Lekan 2004). In his book *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama (1995) draws on the term *Holzweg* to argue that confronting the legacies of German nationalism similarly requires embarking on a path through the woods, even if this leads us to study that which is obscure: nationalism's trajectories have both materialized in the actual, physical constitution of forests, as well as in their mythological variations.²



In my own research, I have explored how these historical entanglements between forest landscapes and nation-making have acquired a strange and unhomely twist in Germany today: in many former East German states, such as Brandenburg and Thuringia, asylum seekers from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East find themselves living in abandoned military barracks situated in the forest. Their isolated location is a result of a series of changes to asylum policy on the national and EU level—especially the post-unification policies that responded to a heated nation-wide asylum debate in the wake of xenophobic attacks against urban refugee shelters in the 1990s.

² On the ambivalent nature of forests as crowd symbol and source of national sentiment, see for example Canetti (1989). Scott (1998) traces the ways in which Prussian scientific forestry provided the visual models of hierarchy and rationalization for other aspects of modern state management, such as the military, agriculture, or urban planning. These state models enable ways of seeing that tend to ignore vernacular uses of the forest.

In this context, refugees were relocated to remote refugee homes (*Flüchtlings- or Asylheime*) in rural East Germany. Tracking these developments, I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork since 2005 with asylum seekers who have lived in refugee homes in the forests of the state of Brandenburg near Berlin.³

One recent attempt to make these displacements of refugees visible—an attempt that has inspired my own ethnographic writing—is *Forst*, an experimental documentary film produced in 2005 by European filmmakers Ascan Breuer, Ursula Hansbauer, and Wolfgang Konrad in collaboration with members of the African refugee activist group *The Voice*.⁴ The film shows how East German forests have become home to a “world of the stranded” (see forstfilm.de): refugees find themselves living on the grounds of former military barracks in a *Heim* (home) just outside Forst, a town close to the Polish border and not far from the March Oder region in Brandenburg, where I conducted fieldwork with refugees and other local residents. The film’s title draws on multiple meanings of the word *Forst*, both the name of a town and the German word for a cultivated forest. At the same time, the title highlights a key distinction in the German imagination of the forest: whereas *Wald* signifies wilderness and the romanticized space of national myth, *Forst* connotes the industrial forest, altered by humans. As European forests have been deeply shaped by humans in the past centuries, this contrast between *Forst* and *Wald* has become nearly indistinguishable in the very materiality of forest landscapes. *Forst* deliberately plays with these blurred cultural meanings by switching back and forth between the unruly, gloomy forest of fairy tales on one hand and the ordered space of the commercial forest on the other.

In *Forst*, the fairy tale of the *Wald* has gone awry and has turned into a nightmare: refugees are stuck in a forest where they encounter a series of bureaucratic confusions and a state of eternal waiting within the asylum process, illustrated in the form of a dense and threatening landscape. *Forst* breaks with documentary and ethnographic conventions of inciting empathy through the portrayal of individual life stories, or “cases.” Instead, the film focuses almost entirely on the claustrophobic environment of a gloomy forest in which refugees live, forging a sense of disorientation rather than facilitating identification. Creating a claustrophobic feeling of being caught in the forest, the film exposes the romanticized image of the German forest (*Wald*) and instead shows its legacies of exclusion, its commercialization, and its function as part of a bureaucratic state apparatus (*Forst*). Yet *Forst* also points to a world in which the marginalized, despite their invisibility within a system of exclusion, employ the forest as the very means of their escape. Thus, while the forest signifies disorientation and entrapment, it also becomes a place of subversion (Steyerl 2005). The film’s cinematic project thereby reveals the forest’s potential for remediation. Such remediation does not connote a radical break or the creation of something “new,” as

³ This research is part of my larger ethnographic project on citizenship, ecology, and migration in the city of Berlin and its surrounding countryside (see my forthcoming book, *Ruderal City: Ecologies of Migration and Urban Life in Berlin*). Research and writing for this project has been funded by grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the ACLS/Mellon Foundation, a UC Chancellor’s fellowship and several grants by the University of California at Santa Cruz. For the purpose of this essay, I am grateful for comments by the TRANSIT editorial team and the anonymous reviewer, as well as feedback from Paulla Ebron, Birte Loeschenkohl, and David Egan.

⁴ The filmmakers’ enterprise received funding by the Austrian Chancellor’s Office, the City of Vienna and two Austrian states (Hadji-Ristic 2006). Activists from the refugee group *The Voice*, *Women in Exile*, and *Caravan for the Rights of Refugees and Migrants* collaborated with the filmmakers to conduct interviews with refugees living in Germany’s forests, a research project that then served as inspiration for the film (Breuer 2005a).

the use of the term in reference to new media might suggest. Rather, among its multiple meanings, remediation can involve remedying something defective, as well as refashioning earlier, exclusionary forms of representation, damage, and coercion. While Bolter and Grusin (2000) point to the double logic of remediation—impelled as it is by the desire both for a multiplicity and abundance of technological platforms and for ever greater immediacy—I here suggest a third meaning of the term. Remediation, in the ecological sense, can also imply a material reworking and repurposing of a degraded environment. As I will show, *Forst* does not foreground the quest for immediacy but rather enables this latter sense of the term.

Engaging with *Forst*, and drawing on my own fieldwork with refugees in Brandenburg, this article explores possibilities for a mode of analysis (in the sense of the Greek meaning of ‘method’: *methodos*, as in *meta-*, expressing development, and *-hodos*, a path or a way) that follows Schama’s call to embark on a path through the woods. Taking place almost entirely in the forest, the film’s affects and atmospheres invoke the visceral dimensions of nationalism and the redrawing of Europe’s borders—a method, I argue, that can be mobilized for social inquiry and critique of racialized exclusions in contemporary asylum worlds. In accord with recent scholarly work on materiality, *Forst*’s focus on ‘affective landscapes’ explores the ways in which the material world takes on a life or vibrancy of its own (Bennett 2010; Haraway 2008). Rather than treating landscapes as passive background onto which social meanings are inscribed, it becomes necessary from this perspective to ask how landscapes are both deeply shaped by the social and enable certain forms of knowledge, embodiment and affect (see Stoler 2004, Stewart 2007, Thrift 2004, Tsing 2005; Chen 2012; and Navaro-Yashin 2012).⁵ Following Schama’s lead to embark on a path through the woods and to “take myth seriously” may thus ironically require pushing social analysis of contemporary national formations beyond a singular focus on metaphor and mediation. Tracing the material, embodied, and affective dimensions of exclusionary European landscapes enables us to draw closer attention to specters of present and past injustices as these are remediated and come alive in German forests and asylum worlds today.

⁵ See also Eric Santner’s concept of ‘spectral materialism’ (2006) and James Scott’s (1998) account of German scientific forestry and the forms of embodiment and affect it enables and disables.



Refugee Homes in the “German Bush”

Today, many asylum seekers from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East find themselves living on former military sites in the forests of Brandenburg and other former East German states. These new geographies have emerged in the course of revisions to asylum and immigration policy over the past several decades. In contrast to many other countries in Europe, Germany’s post-WWII asylum law was fairly liberal: for example, West Germany’s constitution granted asylum as a constitutional right, acknowledging the history of displacement of millions of refugees across Europe under fascism. Yet in 1982, the *Asylverfahrensgesetz* (asylum procedure law) mandated that all asylum seekers be accommodated in refugee homes. This continues to be the dominant approach in many regions in Germany, even in the face of certain EU revisions of that guideline. Following German unification, waves of xenophobic violence, such as the riots and attacks against immigrants and asylum seekers in Hoyerswerda and Rostock, triggered a heated nation-wide debate about asylum. In 1992, the subsequent *Asylkompromiß* (asylum compromise) introduced changes to the asylum law and the constitution, narrowing down the right to political asylum through a series of policies like the Third State Rule, which does not grant asylum to those arriving in Germany from a third state that is recognized as politically safe. As a result, the number of asylum seekers in Germany has dropped dramatically over the

past two decades (ProAsyl 2011, Pieper 2008, tagesschau 2013).⁶ Similar developments can be discerned across Europe as public mistrust of political refugees grows, and as the political institution of asylum is increasingly delegitimized (Fassin 2011: 220).

The increasing spatial isolation of refugees in Brandenburg was also the consequence of post-unification changes to asylum policies across East and West Germany, which involved distributing the number of asylum seekers equally among *Länder* (states) of the East and West. Thus, only a few years after the Berlin Wall had tumbled, East German municipalities rushed to accommodate asylum seekers by setting up new shelters in cities. As a response to xenophobic attacks on these shelters in the 1990s, many refugees were relocated to new “homes” in rural East Germany—often in vacated army barracks in the forest. In the process, many private contractors from the West took advantage of the situation and signed contracts with local municipalities to accommodate refugees in these remote areas (Fluechtlingsrat Brandenburg 2005, Pieper 2008). In Brandenburg, for example, between 4,000 and 6,000 asylum seekers are estimated to live in thirty refugee homes in different locations (Mallwitz 2013). Because official legislation does not permit refugees to work and the *Residenzpflicht* (mandatory residence law) prohibits travel beyond the county limits, it is illegal for many to take a train to nearby urban centers such as Berlin.

In response, refugees, advocacy groups, and human rights organizations have protested against this marginalization in the forest.⁷ Some activists have pointed to traces of German colonial strategies of spatially containing native populations in the mandatory residence law.⁸ But at the center of criticism is the reinforcement of the EU’s outer border through tighter immigration and asylum laws and stricter monitoring of illegal border crossings throughout the Mediterranean.⁹ At the same time, EU nations, such as Germany, have created heightened strategies of surveillance within their borders by stricter asylum laws, racial profiling, and a dense network of detention centers (Fassin 2011; Linke 2010; Pieper 2008). Recent public outrage about the deaths of many refugees crossing the border to Europe in the Mediterranean Sea has left these changing internal surveillances unaddressed. By contrast, refugee protests in the past few years have connected these external and internal developments more explicitly and have pointed to the new racialized exclusions that emerge out of Europe’s fortifications and the Schengen Treaty. Not only do asylum seekers die at the fringes of Europe, they also face growing obstacles in their attempt to receive asylum in Europe: many get stuck in a legal limbo for years while lacking

⁶ Although since 2010 there has been a—much publicly debated—increase in asylum applicants (especially due to increasing political conflict in the Middle East), the proportion between applications and those granted refugee status continues to decline (*Pro Asyl* 2011, *Tagesschau* 2013). In addition, those who do apply often get stuck in legal limbo for years.

⁷ In response to these protests, some German states have recently loosened the legal residency restrictions. As a result, in Brandenburg, asylum seekers with a residence permit (*Aufenthaltsberechtigte*) are allowed to travel across state boundaries to Berlin. In contrast, applicants with a temporary stay permit (*Geduldete*), or a history of violating regulations, have to apply for a travel permit in advance. In 2007, a complaint submitted to the Court for Human Rights concerning this law was declined.

⁸ In former German colonies such as Cameroon, spatial policies were introduced to segregate indigenous from European populations: these policies forced indigenous populations to register for residence in a particular region while restricting travel.

⁹ All members of the EU except Ireland and the UK are part of the Schengen Area and have to adhere to the regulations implemented in the Schengen Treaty in 1985. The treaty’s core aim was to ease border controls between Schengen members while tightening them with non-member states.

permission to obtain gainful employment beyond precarious and informal labor markets. As a result, many refugees encounter a future with few prospects and a daily life in which depression and cycles of illness become the norm. Many face racial discrimination, suspicion and resentment in their everyday interactions with administrative personnel, residents of nearby towns and the police, who often conduct passport controls based on skin color. In addition, the risk of insult and physical violence by Neonazis remains a perpetual threat.

Thus, although the EU border is no longer within close reach in areas such as Brandenburg, more invisible borders have been installed within the region's forests. As in other European countries, Germany's rural landscapes, and forests in particular, have constituted key sites through which to imagine the nation. During the Cold War, Brandenburg's forests served as militarized border zones to guard the nation's border to the West—in much less visible though not less significant ways than the Berlin Wall or its watchtowers. Today, these forests have once again become home to new, hidden forms of marginalization as many Black asylum seekers from East and West Africa come to live in them. The question of which bodies belong and which ones are “out of place,” as well as which lives come to matter (see also Linke 2010 and Mbembe 2003), has been reshuffled again in a deeply racialized way: Brandenburg's forests, formerly militarized as a border to the West, now serve to fortify Europe's borders and provide an unhomely home for those who are marked as unwelcome others. In my own fieldwork in refugee shelters in the forests of Brandenburg, I have traced some of the resulting displacements of these reborderings (Stoetzer, under review),¹⁰ and it is these displacements that are also at the center of the film *Forst*.

¹⁰ In German, *unheimlich* both means un-homely and uncanny. In the most literal sense, *unheimlich* describes a state of being without a home. But it also illustrates a sense of uncertainty, of not being able to trust your senses. Freud has theorized this cognitive uncertainty as the psychic dimensions of the uncanny (Freud 1919). Drawing on Freud, Homi Bhabha uses the notion of the unhomely to describe a postcolonial condition of displacement (Bhabha 1992). For an ethnographic inquiry into the unhomely dimensions of living in refugee homes, as both spaces of belonging and government-mandated sites of exclusion at Berlin's forest edges, see Stoetzer (under review).



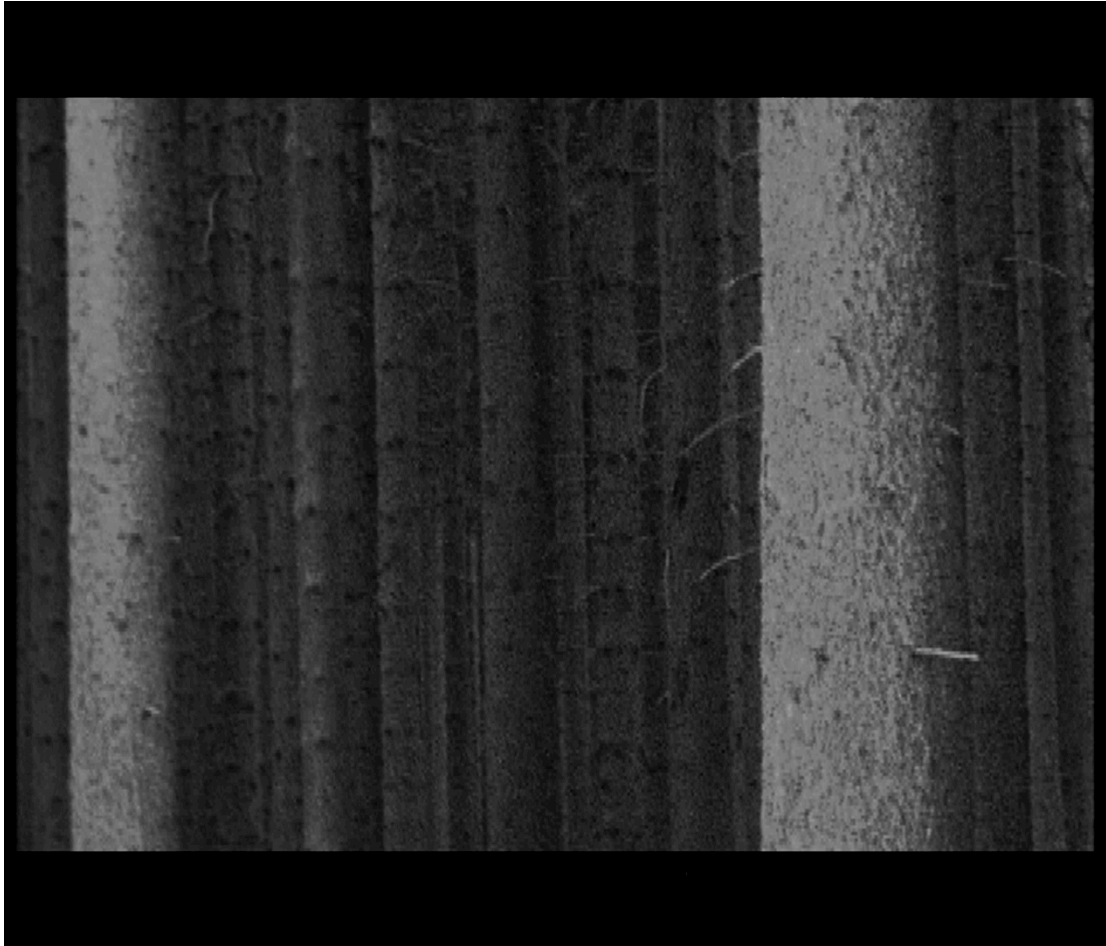
Forst

Aerial shot. Seen in black-and-white, a white car winds its way on a road through a fairy tale-like forest: dark, teutonic, impenetrable. While the car keeps driving, following the smooth line of the road, the camera veers off into the forest and gets entangled in dark, narrow pathways and within tree branches. In their midst, we hear voices and eerie sounds. A woman recounts her arrival in the forest: experiencing a sense of disorientation and disbelief, she enters her new “home” and encounters a diffuse bureaucracy that itself resembles a dense forest, concealing people. Other voices join hers, initiating her into the thicket of the forest. They invoke similar affective states—telling stories of exclusion and abandonment, stories of feeling stuck in and haunted by the forest. While some recall urban places, the forest remains omnipresent: “Even if I manage to break out, the forest will be there: at the train station, in the shopping mall, or on an empty street,” one voice says. As the forest grows denser and darker, another voice recounts being killed “softly” while living in the forest, waiting for years to be granted asylum. Individual trees are sorted in neat rows, like prison bars. “Three days have passed and I am no longer myself. I am locked out in nature,” another voice recalls. Suddenly, sparks of light appear in the foliage. A few trees catch fire. Flames consume the landscape as we learn about the strict regulations that govern life in the forest.

In a dance of impressionistic images, voices, and sounds, the film invokes an affective landscape that haunts the individuals who live in it and isolates them from the rest of society. The forest separates people from each other and alienates them

from themselves. Yet slowly, the forest becomes visible not only as a space of encampment and fear, but also as one of potential encounters:

The atmosphere changes and we see glimpses of light in the forest—the contours of people walking through a grove. We cannot discern their faces, but we can hear their murmuring in the trees, sketching out possibilities for their escape. The sounds of staple guns hitting against wood reverberate through the air as people put posters on the trees, carving out spaces of possible connection.



I first watched *Forst* a few months after its release in 2005¹¹ at a time when I was engaged in fieldwork with asylum seekers in Brandenburg. Screened in the basement of Café Morgenrot, a small café collective in the district of Prenzlauer Berg, the movie's claustrophobic sensibilities were amplified in the darkness of the room. I still remember the gloomy atmosphere among the members of the audience during the discussion afterwards. A friend, an asylum seeker from Kenya who had lived in one of the forest homes for years, had accompanied me to the screening. Also present in the audience were people we both knew from advocacy and refugee activist groups.

¹¹ *Forst* screened at film festivals, in activist circles, and bookstores throughout Germany and Austria, but also played at festivals in Turkey, Bulgaria, Belgium, Ireland, and the Netherlands. The distributor, sixpackfilm, is a non-profit organization based in Austria and distributes Austrian experimental art film and video productions internationally. *Forst* received the Diagonale Award in 2005 for best documentary.



What stayed with me beyond that evening was how the film engaged with the theme of the forest—the “bush,” as many of my interlocutors in the field called it. This theme resonated with stories about the German forest that I had encountered in my own fieldwork and with stories that expressed feelings of being lost in the forest, as well as a sensation of the unhomely (see also Stoetzer, under review). In addition, the film departs from the standard portrayal of refugees as victims and as displaced subjects. Refugees and migrants are often framed in scholarly and public debate as generic figures of the uprooted, the displaced, and “people out of place” (Malkki 1999; Silverstein 2004). In contrast, *Forst* works against any easy identification with the figure of the migrant as displaced subject. Instead, it creates estrangement and switches between perspectives. It does not allow viewers to see who is speaking or where exactly they are located. Rather, the film plays a game of hide-and-seek while its viewers get lost in the forest. For example, in the video’s opening aerial shot, we view the forest from high above and are able to examine its outlines and roads as well as a car moving through it. Yet the all-seeing eye of surveillance soon is undermined: as we fly over the forest landscape, hearing flickering sounds and seeing the shadow of a helicopter in the distance, we lose sense of the larger scheme of the landscape. The camera tilts and steers so slowly and intimately over the landscape of trees that it suddenly appears more like a microscopic close-up of pores of human skin rather than a forest surveyed from above. The effect is that of disorientation, even vertigo, a

journey through an affective landscape in which the boundaries between inside and outside, between the human senses and surrounding environment become blurred.¹²

This shifting of the cinematic gaze continues throughout the film. The film's montage consists primarily of black and white footage in 16 mm film, with screen images alternating between the forest and interior shots of the refugee home. One moment, we encounter an unwieldy forest of entangled tree trunks and branches that form an alien landscape. Then, we are confronted with the militarized and ordered nature of a forest lined with trees in neat rows, like soldiers. As the camera switches between abstract and realistic modes of representation, it also turns to reveal the derelict interior spaces and narrow hallways of the refugee home, exposing the architectural signs of its history as a military encampment. Shadow-like figures stand at the edges of the frame. Off-screen we hear voices, accompanied by shrill and gloomy sounds that create a sense of tension and eeriness.



Forst does not narrate a story of clear trajectories, biographies, or individual scenes that are easily accessible. Instead, it confronts viewers with an unwieldy cinematic landscape – an eerie, entangled terrain of a dark forest, composed of shifting scenes, blurred silhouettes, high-pitched staccatos, and dull low sounds. Disorientation, mistaken identities, and invisibilities are the effect. At various points throughout the film, a woman is shown driving along a windy road. Is she a tourist,

¹² Navaro-Yashin's notion of "affective geographies" similarly captures such an absorption of humans into their environments—a merging of "forces, energies, and affective potentialities of human beings, with their natural, built and material environment" (2012: 27).

heading out for a hike or a vacation in the forest? Or is she administrative personnel whose destination is the *Heim*?¹³ As she stops at a clearing and gets out of her car, we see several men lying on the ground in handcuffs next to her. Facing deportation, they are invisible to her and she steps right past them, continuing her journey indifferently. Her path through the forest constitutes a central theme—a white perspective within which the refugees remain invisible. Throughout the film, this perspective is repeatedly disrupted by the disorienting imagery of the forest. And yet this insistence on an inscrutable landscape of exclusion also entails a risk: while the film manages to avoid representing individual migrant subjects as trapped in a hopeless situation, it also does not have much to say about asylum seekers’ daily interactions—with each other, with social workers in the *Heim* or with people living in nearby towns. Eliding the vernacular, the film runs the risk of reproducing the very (physical and symbolic) isolation in the forest that it seeks to critique.

Nevertheless, *Forst*’s aim is not to represent the vernacular or document a social reality. According to one of the filmmakers, Ascan Breuer, its goal is to work against understanding and to highlight the phantasmatic elements of film as a communicative medium, in the tradition of the horror or thriller genre (Breuer, 2013: 136). The film’s portrayal of the forest and interior domestic landscapes deliberately switches between a realist mode of representation, on one hand, and estrangement and disorientation as aesthetic devices, on the other (Breuer 2013: 134). Drawing on this range of devices, *Forst* refuses a “dominant documentary truth politics which controls the public picture of migration” (Steyerl 2005). Refugees are not ordered along lines of ethnicity or nationality and they do not become social cases, easily regulated by bureaucratic practices. Similarly, the film does not create empathy, nor does it seek to reflect the feelings and experiences of the refugees who speak—a move otherwise so prevalent in the “compassion industry” of much contemporary humanitarianism (Ticktin 2006). Instead of reflecting “true life” (Fassin 2014: 40)¹⁴ or attempting to bridge the gap between viewer and the film, *Forst* redirects the viewer towards that very gap: it creates a dynamic mediation between perspectives by pulling the viewer into an affective landscape of disorientation and estrangement. Deviating from this “politics of truth” prevalent in documentary film and ethnography, *Forst* prevents identification as it produces a sense of paranoia, discomfort, doubt and perhaps, even outrage. Throughout the film, viewers are confronted with a sense of disbelief and the lingering question: “Is this real?” (Breuer 2013: 137). As the film reflects on spatial strategies of enclosure in contemporary asylum worlds, it creates an opening within a landscape of shattered dreams and disorientation. Out of it, new possibilities arise—or as Homi Bhabha puts it, “in the stirrings of the unhomely, another world becomes visible” (Bhabha 1992: 141). In the film’s landscape of ruination, refugees “count in a tradition of freedom fighting, for which the forest offers [...] seclusion” (Steyerl 2005): stapling posters to trees, reading maps in the old barracks, and sketching out a cartography of their escape, they use the forest as a space of agitation.

It is this journey among shattered and unhomely worlds that constitutes *Forst*’s effectiveness and, I argue, holds the seeds for a critical ethnography and cultural analysis. Rather than strive for immediacy, *Forst* enables a third, environmental sense

¹³ The credits refer to “Karin Zimmermann as Mrs. Kruger,” the only named character in the film.

¹⁴ In his recent essay, “True Life, Real Lives. Revisiting the Boundaries Between Ethnography and Fiction,” Didier Fassin (2014) draws on Proust’s reflections on life to challenge the binary between ethnography and fiction. This binary assumes fiction to be able to more compellingly capture “real lives,” whereas ethnography and other modes of social analysis are tied to “truth” and to representing “true life.”

of the term remediation: it reworks multiple meanings and affective environments amid destruction. In a broken environment, the film embarks on a track through the woods, a Holzweg, of nationalism and social exclusion that threatens to lead nowhere and yet can be repurposed to open up new paths.



Thinking with *Forst*

Forst opens up new possibilities not only for visual media but also for (ethnographic) social inquiry and its remediation of the shattered social worlds of contemporary asylum regimes more generally. The film does so, firstly, by raising the question of how we mediate, represent, and explore the “zones of abandonment” (Biehl 2005) and spaces of social exclusion that make up today’s asylum worlds. Instead of portraying the “true” life of refugees, *Forst* exposes the very truth politics at work in documenting social worlds. Both documentary film and ethnography are genres of non-fiction and aim to expose (disturbed) social realities.¹⁵ Secondly, the film provides a reflection on the affective and visceral dimensions of racial

¹⁵ I am only gesturing at the overlaps between activism, documentary film, and the ethnographic genre. For a more in depth discussion on the respective developments of documentary and ethnographic film and their focus on exposing “truths” and remediating lived experience in the context of new film-making technologies, see MacDonald (2013); for a series of analyses of the convergences between NGO activism and visual culture, see McLagan/McKee (2012).

formations and marginalization in contemporary Europe. By tracing estrangement and disorientation amid life in isolated forest homes in Germany, it asks about the affective landscapes and forms of embodiment and disembodiment that emerge in the face of contemporary asylum policies. Let me elaborate on these two points with reference to my ethnographic fieldwork.

1. The Truths of Migration in Documentary Film and Ethnography

In my own fieldwork with refugees living in Brandenburg, I soon stumbled over the pitfalls and truth politics of documenting migrants' lives in ethnographic research. In fact, as I embarked on my research in a refugee home located on the grounds of a former military base in the March Oder region about 40 kilometers away from Berlin, I quickly realized that studying the "true" life of asylum seekers stood in the way not only of connecting to people in a meaningful way, but also of understanding the complexities of their lives. When I began talking to residents in the Heim near the town of Zarin,¹⁶ my initial questions triggered confusion: Why did I want to know *anything* about this place? And why did I ask so many questions? For my interlocutors, the very act of asking questions evoked interrogation and was tightly linked to a bureaucratic apparatus of control that turned them into manageable "cases." Asking questions meant subjecting their experiences to the question of "identity" and evaluating whether they were worthy of asylum.¹⁷ For this reason, the residents of the Heim eyed me with suspicion: "Was I a spy? Or worse yet, an agent for the local social office, trying to get information about their true migratory story?"

Furthermore, many of my interlocutors had had their fair share of encounters with what they experienced as journalistic or academic tourism. Some initially responded to my questions about their experiences with annoyance since they were used to being questioned and sharing their stories, even though no one ever ended up helping them in return. While accommodating the journalistic and scholarly desire to create a touristic image of the "true life" of refugees, their testimonials also resisted the notion of refugees as uprooted, alienated from place, and without agency.

In addition, when I planned my first trip to one of the refugee homes, an asylum seeker from Kenya named Mike, who had lived in a *Heim* for years, gave me the advice to see and sense the landscape there instead of talking to people right away. He was convinced that simply observing the place would tell me more than interviewing anyone. Similarly, others who lived in the *Heim* told me about their profound confusion about how to read their surroundings: were they living in a refugee home or an insane asylum? Was this a farm in the middle of nowhere or a military camp?

In my own ethnographic practice and writing it thus became important to go beyond a simple focus on interviews and reflect on the sensory qualities of the forest and the built environment, as well as the ways in which different actors inhabited these. This involved not only tracking the affective dimensions of the *Heim* and the forest – a dimension that often falls by the way side in public imaginaries and debates about migration. It also required me to more closely attend to both my subjects' and my own sense of disorientation and the various cognitive dissonances at work in the field. Was the forest an idyllic tourist space, a habitat of wild animals, or an enclosure imprisoning people in legal limbo? Was the *Heim* a military camp, a refuge or an

¹⁶ In order to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors, I use pseudonyms for both people and towns.

¹⁷ Becoming an asylum seeker in Europe, one is confronted with a bureaucratic apparatus that searches out the truth of one's life path. Consequently, many refugees are forced to produce—often pre-scripted—stories that fit the demands of asylum law (see also Cabot 2013, Williksen 2004).

insane asylum? By pointing to the invisibility of the people hidden in the forest, *Forst* exposes a certain gaze and way of travel instead of creating a testimony or producing feelings of empathy and dismay. As it problematizes practices of seeing and inhabiting a landscape, the movie speaks to structures of invisibility—and especially the invisibility of refugee camps in the German countryside. As one narrator puts it in the film, “No one knew where this place was.” This was precisely my own experience in the field: initially, I had trouble finding the exact locations of some of the refugee homes in Brandenburg. No one knew where they were, except those who had lived there in the past, or people who had lived in close-by towns.

Yet *Forst* goes further than simply questioning a truth politics of the displaced migrant. Creating a sense of claustrophobia and disorientation, the film situates viewers in a specific sensory and affective landscape and undoes the national image of the forest as a landscape of belonging and space of rootedness. Carefully chronicling the different textures of entangled branches, trees lined up in rows and forests seen from above, the film traces the ambiguity of the forest and its affective worlds; some attempt to survey or administer it, while others find themselves out of place, living in limbo and exposed to the specter of racial violence.

In my fieldwork, anecdotes about the unhomeliness of the “German bush” abound. Many residents of the *Heim*, told me stories of being scared of the “bush”—a concept they knew from Kenya and which they jokingly used to refer to the German forest (Stoetzer, under review). As many hailed from urban areas in Kenya, the bush signified risk, uncertainty and the threat of violence. Indeed, their references to the dangerous bush pointed to the experience of violence: some had been attacked by Neonazis in the forest and in nearby towns. Talking about the “bush” therefore provided a commentary on a state of endless waiting and alluded to colonial times, in which natives were placed in the bush, beyond civilization. For them, arriving in the German bush was a great disappointment: it smashed their dreams for a better future in an urban Europe assumed to be rich in possibilities.

Revealing these multiple meanings, *Forst* invokes the forest not only as zone of national security and European border fortification. By engaging the image of the forest as national myth, it also draws out a form of “wilderness” that is the result of contemporary racialized exclusions and their colonial legacies. What my Kenyan interlocutors called the “bush” is both the metaphorical space in which racism and colonialism have situated the colonized, making them subject to civilizing efforts and bureaucratic control. In Germany, it is also the place of encounter with racist violence and deep seated beliefs in the rootedness (*Abstammung*) of human difference (see Linke 1999b).¹⁸ *Forst* therefore begins its critique and engagement with possibilities within and beyond the “wild” of contemporary and past racisms in the very space of “nature” itself.¹⁹ It is this search for new possibilities amid the wilderness of exclusion and its domesticating effects that constitutes *Forst’s* first step on a path through the woods, beyond the truth politics of documenting migrant lives.

¹⁸ In her book *Blood and Nation*, Uli Linke (1999b: 58-62) traces genealogies of vegetative and natural images of human and non-human kinship within Germanic symbolism and folk narrative—and illustrates their survival in modern German and European ideas of kinship and race. In this context, forests and trees are closely associated with a sense of rootedness, kinship and racial belonging: the German word “abstammen” (to descend, originate, or stem from) comes from “Stamm” (tree trunk, root, but also clan or tribe) and carries connotations of race and kin.

¹⁹ See also Deborah Bird Rose’s redefinition of the “wild” as the very process of colonization and destruction itself (Rose 2004): colonization and racism produce spaces of wilderness and wild people in need of control.

2. The Affective Landscapes of Asylum and Racial Exclusions

Forst invites critical thinking on European, and specifically German, geographies of race. The film reflects on racialized exclusions at Europe's periphery, not in the form of personal stories and lived experiences, but rather in the embodied, affective and visceral aspects of living at the margins. Directing its focus towards these affective landscapes, *Forst* illustrates how the redrawing of Europe's borders, and the nationalism and racialization practices that go hand in hand with this process, transcend not only the boundaries of the human skin but also entail a broader geography: they mark environments, affects, psyches, and territories.

The isolation of asylum seekers in Brandenburg's forests stands in stark contrast to a current rhetoric and politics of immigrant "integration." In the city of Berlin, where I have conducted ongoing research in conjunction with site visits to Brandenburg since 2005, debates about immigration and unemployment have stressed the existence of troubled neighborhoods and a "clash of cultures" in the city. In a post-unification context of welfare reform and increasing unemployment, especially among the city's Turkish and Muslim communities, public discourse and policy has located the source of inequality in these communities themselves. Immigrants are assumed to create parallel worlds and dwell in social hotspots – metaphors that invoke a sense of lurking danger. The question of how immigrants inhabit the urban environment has thus become a key means of articulating their status as strangers—irrespective of their actual citizenship—and their racialization (see Stoetzer 2014).²⁰ Both the bodies of immigrants and their environments figure as "matter out of place" (Douglas 2002 [1966])²¹ in need of containment via policies of "integration." As EU and national "integration projects" primarily target immigrants of color and non-Western migrant laborers, they echo colonial attempts to civilize populations cast as racially and spatially other (Nghi Ha 2010).

Integrating immigrants in cities and isolating asylum seekers in the countryside represent opposite spatial strategies of managing xenophobic fears, racial exclusions, and creating belonging. Mediated through particular environments, these strategies echo a fraught history of imagining and (re-) constructing the nation through urban and rural landscapes. In Germany, nationalism has been constructed via the metaphor of home and homeland, *Heimat*—the idea that Germans, originally dwellers in swamps and woods, are rooted in their environment through relations of blood and agricultural ties (Schama 1995; Lekan 2004). Thus natural environments—and forests in particular—have been a key site for establishing what it means to be German. Uli Linke's work has reminded us further that there is a longer genealogy of racial ideologies in Germany that inscribes difference not only onto bodies but also onto landscapes (Linke 1999a,b,c). Historically, the placement of bodies in particular landscapes has served as a way to solidify whiteness and national identity.²²

²⁰ In my book manuscript, I trace how human-environment relations become a key site of articulating citizenship and belonging. In addition, via a series of ethnographic sites, I show how immigrants are often racialized on the basis of their relation to the environment. For example, local and national media paint a gloomy picture of the capital's "underclass" problem, depicting scenes of unemployed, "wild" barbecuers—a favorite past time among many Turkish immigrants - polluting Berlin's "green lungs" with smoke and garbage in the city's parks (see Stoetzer 2014).

²¹ In her book, *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas develops the notion of dirt as matter out of place and traces the social history of ideas about pollution and the ways in which these maintain social boundaries (Douglas 2002[1966]).

²² Linke points out that these took on an especially high currency in Nazi corporeal imaginaries that linked nature and the nation with human bodies, with discourses of blood and with public space (Linke 1999a, b, c). Furthermore, in environmental policy-making, the protection and regulation of nature has

As questions of who is rooted in place are once again renegotiated in Germany and Europe more generally, we can discern how ideas about racial otherness not only work through bodies but also geographical territories and environments: the bodies of immigrants are essentialized in their difference because they appear to have an inappropriate or disconnected relationship to the environment. It is this move—from a focus on the body/subject to a wider topography of racialized exclusions and forms of marginalization—that is at the center of *Forst*. In the film, the experience of exclusion becomes enmeshed in affects and the embodiment of a specific place. As such, the film's landscapes create their own forms of embodiment, which have their own force. Blurring fiction and non-fiction, the film points to the affective dimensions of racialized exclusions in Europe and the ways in which the refugees' isolation and their racial otherness is created on both the level of the fictitious and the real, the symbolic and the material.

Recent scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences has pointed to the limitations of approaches that frame race as a discursive formation. Going beyond the view of race as social construction, this scholarship highlights how national and racial formations not only mark human bodies, but also psyches, environments, and non-humans (Kosek et al. 2003; Hartigan 2013; Linke 1999c; Wolch 2000). Exploring the material and embodied dimensions of racialization is therefore central to understanding the complexities of race. Arun Saldanha (2006), for example, makes the case for shifting attention away from a paradigm of mediation in contemporary critical thinking about race. He argues that by focusing on the centrality of language in our analysis of social worlds, we have utilized a view of language as a form of mediation in which materiality and experience disappear or are relegated to the unknowable, passive background of language's—and I might add, human—actions. From this perspective, “language (or culture at large) is a screen which mediates between consciousness and the obscure matter of the body” (Saldanha 2006: 12). Thus, the challenge is to shift focus from the discursive production of race (and gender) towards the “viscosity” of race, which would involve acknowledging the productiveness and stickiness of bodies and matter without assuming any immediacy or metaphysical presence that sees bodies and geographies as transparent, primary, or bounded (ibid).²³ As the film *Forst* redirects our focus towards unhomey reworkings of race, nation, and nature in the forests of contemporary Germany, we can see the outlines of a critical analysis that attends to this stickiness of social formations as they are remediated in contemporary forms of living and dying in Europe's asylum worlds. These “sticky” remediations do not require a desire for a sense of immediacy – of portraying migrant life as it “truly is.” Rather, as *Forst* does, such analysis engages affective environments in which one cannot be at ease. These environments nevertheless stick with the observer, as much as they haunt those who live in them every day.²⁴

entangled discourses of environmentalism with ideologies of the nation (Rollins 1995, Brueggemeier et al. 2005) Yet as Lekan (2004), points out, discourses of “homeland” (*Heimat*) have always included both democratic, pluralist understandings as well as racist and nationalist ones (Lekan 2004: 6).

²³ Drawing on Deleuze, Saldanha (2006) posits race as an embodied and material event and thus productively opens up analysis to include questions of materiality.

²⁴ Viscosity, I argue, is a useful concept here in relation to the question of remediation, representation and matter. Drawing on Sartre's notion of viscosity, Mary Douglas writes about the relation between the experiencing self and the experienced world as one of viscosity. Viscosity suggests a state that is “half way between solid and liquid. It is like a cross-section in a process of change. [...] Its stickiness is a trap, it clings like a leech; it attacks the boundary between myself and it.” Attending to stickiness, we



Conclusion

In recent years, the media's coverage of immigration to the EU has largely focused on the many deaths at the outer borders of Europe as people make their way from the Middle East and Africa to Southern Europe, often risking their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea in shaky boats and make-shift arrangements. Yet what often remains unspoken are the subsequent life paths of those who "make it" to Europe, only to get caught in cycles of legal limbo, restricted movement, and precarious labor. Whereas many refugees drown at the borders of Europe, those who live in the center are often faced with specters of suicide, depression, violence, and prospects of a bleak future (Fassin 2011; Linke 2013). This situation calls for a more thorough analysis of the physical and affective environments in which refugees find themselves today.

The moral economy of immigration policies in Europe oscillates between compassion and repression (Fassin 2011; Ticktin 2011). Critical engagements with asylum therefore can challenge this duality by paying attention to the broader affective landscapes at stake in the re- and unmaking of belonging in Europe. It is this very move that constitutes *Forst's* contribution. Taking viewers on a track through the woods, *Forst* breaks with documentary and mass media conventions of portraying "true life" through individual life stories that elicit empathy. Instead, the film

can learn something about the properties of matter and the interrelation between the self and the world (Douglas 2002: 47).

provokes affects and points towards the visceral dimensions of contemporary racialized forms of exclusion. Confronting viewers with a haunted forest landscape, the film reflects on the ways in which social injustices and racial formations are inscribed in physical environments and our relations to them. It is in this sense that *Forst* remediates the material and metaphorical manifestations of life paths that are at risk of leading into the thicket of the forest. Yet setting out on such a path through the woods may be key to any analysis that engages with the realities of those who embark on yet another journey, through today's Europe.

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