

Forest 404 (BBC Sounds, 2019)

Forest 404 is a new podcast produced by the BBC and written by Timothy X. Atak. Sold as an ‘eco-thriller’, it is a multi-fanged piece, which incorporates elements of eco-criticism, horror, the Gothic, sci-fi, and documentary. Its story is narrated and predominantly performed by Pearl Mackey (of *Doctor Who* (2005-present) fame), but the story-telling element is merely one part of this project. Each of the nine narrative episodes is followed by an academic talk and a natural soundscape, engaging with some of the show’s central themes. With the close of each episode, listeners are invited to participate in a mass public experiment, in which humans’ emotional responses to the sounds of nature are recorded. The series is part of an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded project centred on the significance of wildlife filmmaking in the last twenty-five years. Created and brought to life by its writer, actors, BBC Radio 4, BBC Natural History, the University of Bristol, the University of Exeter, and The Open University, *Forest 404* is a collaborative and innovative achievement.

The story is set in the future, in ‘The Fast Times’, where *homo sapiens*, as we know them, have nearly died out. Our replacements are technologically advanced, ‘better’ versions of ourselves, which hybridise human and artificial intelligence. One of these ‘advancements’ is our protagonist, Pan, a data analyst who specialises in reviewing and deleting ‘useless’ sound recordings from ‘The Old Times’ (*our* times). The story is set in motion when one day she discovers, amongst these audio files, a soundscape of a forest. Completely dissociated from untouched wilderness as she is – even trees, we learn, are a thing of the past – the sounds are entirely alien to her. Moreover, we learn, these sounds are *dangerous*. They represent something called ‘the rupture’ and have the power to release a ‘deadly virus’. Cue a cat-and-mouse chase, as Pan turns her back on futuristic urbanity, seeking to learn more about the origins of her aural discovery. Chased by the sinister ‘Hands’ – eerie automaton guards devoted to the law of *progress* – she delves underground to discover the last human, Theia (Pippa Haywood), who is protecting and nurturing an enormous underground tree. It transpires that ‘the rupture’ is the more-than-human world and that ‘the virus’ is the unbearable knowledge of this world’s anthropocentric destruction. Most who encounter evidence of the long-gone wild are so totally overwhelmed by this unconscious revelation that they die, but Pan, for some reason, is immune. The tale ends with Pan and her former boss/potential love interest Daria (Tanya Moodie) realising that there is perhaps a way to share the knowledge of nature – and its loss – for good, and she sets off in the direction of a

radio tower, with the intention to transmit the titular file 'Forest 404' for all the world to hear...

Though the narrative story itself does not break any significant new ground – at times it seems to be simply lifting and sampling elements from other well-known dystopian texts – it is nonetheless engaging within the context of the show's genuinely interdisciplinary and intermedial nature. The descriptions of 'The Fast Times' are all too uncomfortably familiar: this dry, chrome world with its searing technology that has largely left us behind seems a thoroughly feasible, if cautionary outcome of our current actions. The show's sound design, though sometimes intrusive, especially in early episodes, is for the most part evocative. The refrain provided by the 'Forest 404' file in particular becomes more hauntingly enchanting each time we hear it – and does increasingly sound, as Pan describes it, 'like music'. The characters are not developed in enormous detail, and are occasionally a little caricatured, but they serve their purpose in guiding us through this dark, haunting world and its key warnings against the 'natureless' world we would seem to desire. The main strength, in terms of narrative, lies in the show's conceit of positing regret and sadness as the underlying terrors of the infectious rupture. In Andrew Smith and William Hughes' Introduction to *EcoGothic* (2013), they emphasise humankind's '*fragmentation*' from the more-than-human as the key element in the 'gothicisation' of 'nature'.¹ *Forest 404* dramatises the terror that develops from a disruption of the human/nonhuman relationship; for example, a man who merely *hears* the sounds of a forest reacts by walking, screaming, into traffic. The show therefore provides an interesting commentary on how we see – or should see – 'ecophobia'.² It suggests that our fears of the nonhuman may stem less from a hatred for the unknown, and more from a sadness and sense of loss for what we *don't* know.

What sets *Forest 404* apart and makes it memorable is its imbrication of story and realism. The academic talks that follow the episodes are appealing in their own right, but somehow engage us more *personally* when coming immediately after the narrative. It is as if the story 'opens us up' to wanting to understand intellectually our interactions with the world around us. Each academic talk is introduced by Mackey, who usefully bridges the gap between fiction and fact, speaking as herself, but making links between her character Pan and

¹ Andrew Smith and William Hughes, 'Introduction: Defining the EcoGothic', in *EcoGothic*, ed. by Andrew Smith and William Hughes (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 1-14 (p. 2).

² This term has been popularised by Simon C. Estok, who writes in detail on our fearful/hateful attitudes to the more-than-human world. See Simon C. Estok, 'Theorising in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia', *International Studies in Literature and the Environment (ISLE)*, 16.4 (Spring 2009), 203-25; and Estok, *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

the subject of the talk. A range of thinkers have been brought on board to discuss a variety of related topics. Standout examples include instrumentalist Cosmo Sheldrake on changing sounds in the world, natural historian James Aldred on the reasons for the longevity of trees' lives, and the beautifully poignant 'Love Letter to the Forest' from biologist David Haskell. The majority of the talks are easily accessible, only around ten minutes in length, and introductory in nature. They pose intriguing questions, many of which carry eco-horror undertones, such as 'How Will Humans Die Out?' and 'Could I Live in Darkness?' Listeners are introduced to a broad range of interesting ideas and discussion points – such as what 'death' is in the digital age and how humans, unlike any other species, often 'shout over' each other in cities, diverging from 'normal' biophanies, but blend with the sounds of nature when existing in tribes in wild environments. The soundscapes that follow each episode add to the immersive effects of *Forest 404*, providing sounds such as rainforests and whale song. However, these are unfortunately extremely short, suggesting an underestimation of audience attention spans, which seems contrary to the series' overall vibe.

Forest 404, though certainly not seamless, is an ambitious and ultimately impressive exploit. Most importantly, it brings people from different fields and media – authors, historians, literary critics, scientists, musicians, and so on – into conversation in an immersive and inclusive way, which feels fresh and new. In the age of Anthropocene Gothic, it represents vital new possibilities for storytelling.

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