

GOTHIC NATURE



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Forest 404: Interview with writer Timothy X Attack

Interview by Elizabeth Parker

Forest 404, the new and distinctly immersive BBC podcast, is part story, part academic discussion, and part soundscape. The narrative is set in the future, in a fast and dazzling world of technology, where ‘untouched’ Nature is almost entirely unknown. It centres on the story of one young woman, Pan (voiced by Pearl Mackie), who one day discovers an audio file of a forest soundscape – and her dangerous journey to find and understand the origins of this ‘music’. Timothy X Attack, writer of the series, sat down with *Gothic Nature* to discuss this innovative eco-thriller.



EP: What inspired you to write *Forest 404*?

TA: For about 10 years I worked in the BBC archives, and for a while was part of a team trawling through unlabeled media to see if any of it was unique in our collection, undigitised. I think I’d just spent a morning listening to a penguin colony in South Georgia, a solid hour of KWARK KWARK KWARK KWARK...then I loaded up a mystery DAT, and this gorgeous atmosphere burst through the headphones: a Sumatran rainforest with a lonely, eerie birdsong punctuating the buzz at regular intervals. Every now and then the recordist, Sue Western, would lean into the mic and whisper some comment about her surroundings. I was totally mesmerised by it.

I ended up buying the rights to the recording to use in a theatre show *The Bullet And The Bass Trombone*, made by my own company Sleepdogs. Then, in 2018, when producer Becky Ripley approached me with a proposition for a drama podcast where the main emotional prompt was ‘what does it feel like to listen to recordings of the natural world?’ the Sumatran recording immediately sprang to mind as a catalyst. I suggested we shift the story into sci-fi, to imagine a world where whoever was listening to this recording lived in a post-natural environment, someone who had never known a tree... and I built the story from there, bit by bit.

I run a company called Sleepdogs with my partner Tanuja Amarasuriya (a director and sound designer) and we do quite a lot of field recording. In many of our projects, music is constructed from what we capture. Whenever we travel we spend quite a bit of time behind microphones, listening, and we often discuss how there’s every chance we’re hearing bioacoustics that will disappear one way or another – perhaps within a scarily short space of time thanks to the climate crisis. So it felt important to meet those feelings head-on in fiction.



EP: *Gothic Nature* centres on new research in the areas of ‘eco-horror’ and the ‘ecoGothic’. In short, it is interested in interrogating cultural discussions of the darker sides of the natural world – and the darker sides of *our relationship* to the natural world. In what ways do you think *Forest 404* interacts with some of these ideas?

TA: Well. Here we go.

I feel the ‘conquest of nature’ philosophy that has driven western civilisation’s last few hundred years—and in turn the cultural makeup of global capitalism—means that we so often frame the natural world as a service provider. We like the bits that are beautiful or useful to us, and filter out or throw out the rest.

But I don’t say this in a holier-than-thou way (I hope) because I’m as likely as any fellow city dweller to avoid the sludgier, more entropic parts of my surroundings whenever I’m outside the city – and to be clear, my idea of total *hell* is a survival holiday or anything along those lines. Camping? Hate it with a passion. I’m a proper homebody and I’m pretty much lost without my technology.

So it’s been frighteningly easy for me to excavate that unsound, disconnected part of my personality, and portray a civilisation where people are in force-10 denial about our place in the natural world – physically, scientifically, emotionally. Because I’m already steeped in those denials.

The authorities in the world of *Forest 404* describe the historical presences of trees and flowers as a massive ‘rupture’, they’re considered representative of disease and decay; tumorous or cancerous in the eyes of this future society. They look upon forests and jungles and gardens in the same way we look upon the Elizabethans throwing their shit directly into the street, it’s kind of “why would you ever tolerate that?” I was pretty shocked with how easy it was for me to write these more vituperative and dismissive attitudes, but it felt... *right*. It felt horribly honest. I went inwards to the part of me that, when confronted by the wider biosphere beyond my cosy corner of Bristol, feels properly, stupidly small... and kind of runs away from the full implications of it.

Generally speaking, I like my stories to have an unanswerable question at their heart, and so the key one in *Forest 404* became about how we live with things that make us feel so ridiculously small. Because we're undoubtedly tiny little blips – as individuals, as a species. I reckon homosapiens could well be the species equivalent of around 2 years old right now: just about becoming self-aware, just becoming capable of properly independent perspective through language and co-operation. And the climate emergency is our species' identity crisis, our toddler temper tantrum which we'll have to grow out of, to face facts, if we're ever going to survive.

So, in *Forest 404* I wanted to show all these fears, these denials, from some very personal points of view, through different kinds of people at very different ends of the philosophical spectrum. One of the protagonists utterly despises the idea of the natural world, another is on a quixotic quest to preserve it out of deep love, and then our hero Pan is torn between the two; she's curious but totally uninformed, without a language for any of the issues.

EP: The BBC bills your series as an 'eco-thriller'. Is this how you would categorise it and to what extent do you think 'genre' is important?

TA: A listener on social media recently categorised it as 'Queer sci-fi eco-quest with non-fiction and sound art satellites', which I like, a *lot*.

I'd probably emphasise the sci-fi and, yep, sure, I'm an old-school geek but I think it's crucially important as a genre. I'm going to make a grand claim that if we ever get out of this mess of our own making, if there's any cultural form that might end up saving us, it'll be sci-fi or speculative fiction. Where else do we look to our future and ask: do we seriously want this? Because right now politics is a fucking shower, innit?



EP: Tell us a little bit about the show’s interdisciplinary nature and why it was important to you to blend fact and fiction, merging the story with interviews from experts, soundscapes, and public engagement.

TA: this was a part of the podcast’s identity that had already been put in place by Becky Ripley and the commissioners at the BBC, well before I came on board. It really drew me to the project. With *Sleepdogs*, we often make shows where the line between fiction and reportage is blurred, it’s something which began as an emotional expression, but in recent years has become more and more political, we look back on those stories and they feel like post-truth explorations – only pre-Brexit, pre-President Trump. One of the reasons we need to teach storytelling better in schools is because we desperately need the ability to discern between the healthy use of fiction and the instances where fiction lurks in disguise and can do serious damage; to know when we’re being fed a story rather than fact. So it felt good to be part of a big ambitious crossover project with the BBC, and I was very happy to jump through the kind of hoops we had to jump through to make it all work.

Emotionally, I think it’s a lovely act of balance to take this cranked sci-fi story and anchor it with non-fiction talks and moments of relative calm. The scientific investigation by Alex Smalley and team at the University of Exeter was always at its heart, as well: it was in place well before the dramatic proposition, so I’m in the weird situation of hoping that some of its findings might prove me wrong about, for instance, my answers to your second question...!

EP: To my mind, the title evokes both HTTP 404, the ‘page not found’ error message, and Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*. I wondered if you could talk a little about the inspiration behind the title.

TA: I take ages with titles. Sometimes I can’t write another word until they’re right. For a while the story was called things like *CLICK HERE TO REMEMBER FOREVER* or *THE LAST MUSIC* or *ECHOSPHERE* (geddit?) but what I was searching for was something that felt like it contained not just the presence of nature AND sci-fi, but also a sense of loss. Tough when you also need something that’ll show up on a search engine AND give good graphics on your app.

I think the final crunch came when I forced myself to say out loud, simply, what the story was: “Pan searching for the Forest”. And, lo and behold...

EP: As someone who writes specifically on the archetype of the forest—a space we tend to view in extremes, as either enchanted and magical or Gothic and terrible—I was intrigued by the fact that of all the spaces in Nature you could have selected, you chose a *forest* as the dominant image. Why was this?

TA: Again, I didn’t choose it! In fact, the original working title for the podcast was just ‘FOREST’. I think the original inspiration came from BBC commissioner Rhian Roberts’ favourite childhood haunt.

But what I found very easy to connect to was the rainforest as a totem for ecological loss. I think that’s probably becoming a dominant 21st century trope.

I grew up on the edge of two forests in different parts of the world: my family are from Yorkshire, living in a house my mum still owns, just up the road from Hardcastle Crag in Hebden Bridge – where my Dad helped run a working men’s club on the edge of the river Calder, hidden under the trees. But when I was very young we moved to Rio De Janeiro, and we lived in a district of the city on the slopes of Corcovado, a patch of tropical forest slap bang next to us—a tiny part of the Mata Atlantica—that once in every while we’d walk through to get to friends’ houses. It was full of humming birds.

Meanwhile Hardcastle Crag is mostly steep slopes of dense oak, beech and pine. Every year there’s an arts festival in town which means you’ll find artworks hanging from branches or sprouting from the bracken.

So I don’t know if the forest represents a binary of magic/nightmare for me in that way. I think it’s more a constituency all of its own. One thing I do love is a forest ruin, though – anything overgrown or abandoned or repurposed by the plants. There’s a kind of statue-of-Ozymandias buzz to anything like that.

EP: Landscape writer Jay Appleton talks about how we, as a species, have evolved from ‘forest-dwellers’ to ‘apartment-house-dwellers’. Could you talk a little about your views on our relationship to the forest today?

TA: What interests me is that, in the British Isles, we’ve got a landscape that was once so heavily forested it was kind of the islands’ dominant presence, and I’ve always wondered what kind of ghosts of the wildwood modern Britons live with.

On the one hand, so many of our screen stories use woods and forests as a dreamscape... on the other hand maybe that’s because they’re just relatively easy to film in.

I’ve seen a few theatre shows/live art performances in forests. They always seem to have a strong element of pagan ritual, they’re often protracted, lengthy; time-focused as opposed to action-focused, as if we secretly suspect time operates differently between the tree trunks.

The city mirroring the forest also intrigues me. Modern buildings sway and creak in the wind; birds nest on telephone posts. I live next to the M32 and we often describe the noise as our equivalent of a river or distant seashore, the sound has tides...

But most of all I feel we visit the forest as if it were a loved but slightly weird parent: most of us only do it occasionally, with pangs of contradictory filial emotions.



EP: The main character in *Forest 404* is of course called Pan. This immediately brought to my mind Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1890) and thoughts on how the mythical god is varyingly presented in our stories as either merely playful and disruptive, or as decidedly sinister. What are your associations with 'Pan' and in what ways did these inspire your creation of the protagonist?

TA: actually, I can't tell you the reason Pan is called Pan without spoiling some of the key-changes that occur during the story...! The explanation was cut from the final draft of the podcast script... but...

Maybe I can just say any connection to the myth of Pan/Faunus/Pushan is merely a happy coincidence, maybe a subconscious decision?

EP: For me, the descriptions of Fume Town are some of the most disturbing in the series. I know that for many people—for example, David Lynch, who has a love affair with the industrial—these spaces can be every bit as exciting as they are disturbing. How do you personally envision Fume Town?

TA: The entire structure of the sub-city in *Forest 404* came from an image that once struck me as a teenager, going through the stuff collected in my parent's attic in Leicestershire. I wondered what it would be like for the loft to not just be the top of the house, but for the house itself to be underneath some unstoppable, ever-growing, out-of-control pantropolis; if you were an adventurer tunnelling deep into the urban past, you'd have to access this house downwards, pulling away the roof tiles, clambering into this neglected, insulation-filled attic before descending into what used to be bedrooms and living areas etc. It was probably all heavily inspired by JG Ballard's short story 'The Concentration City'. I made myself feel claustrophobic just by thinking about it, and the image stuck with me for many years until finding its home in *Forest 404*.

There's also a sketch in the comedy series *Absolutely* (1989-) where a character called Don McDiarmid reports on a trip to London but isn't at all impressed by it – he describes it as kinda samey, nothing much to see, Marble Arch and Piccadilly Circus looking identical to him... and

on further interrogation it emerges that he never once left the Underground. I've never been able to look at a tube station the same way since. Whenever I'm in London I take a while to imagine Oxford Circus or Paddington as an environment people spend their entire lives in, never leaving. It's especially interesting when images of the natural world are plastered all over the ad hoardings, like they're goading you, laughing at every life choice you've ever made. Perhaps I imagine Fumetown as a bit more like Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) than David Lynch. It's a place where the inhabitants are actually proud of the curve of the massive metal ducts bifurcating their living rooms.

EP: The most moving moment of the series for me personally is when we discover that the hugely feared and potentially deadly 'virus' that accompanies an awareness of Nature is simply *human regret* for our destruction of the natural world. The fact that Nature is only really known in 'The Slow Times' and is thoroughly distanced in 'The Fast Times' made me think too of the arguable 'mania' of contemporary society. This idea that if we stop or slow down, we will immediately feel sad is beautifully demonstrated when Pan is surprised to discover that her mind, when read by a computer, is filled with sadness. Could you talk a little bit about these ideas?

TA: In some ways obviously it's a big brutal sci-fi metaphor for our current predicament. But beyond that I think it's totally possible to feel deeply sad for something you're *unaware* is missing.

What interested me in storytelling terms is that this sense of an almost spiritual loss could lead instead to a terrible revulsion, a running-away from the grief, something that broke people's brains if they dwelt on it long enough. In the world of *Forest 404* the root cause is discovered through technology, scanning the contents of a mind... but of course we already have our own omni-present version of this revulsion: the derision towards belief structures that extol balance and mindfulness and co-operation rather than individualistic gain. Faced with big perturbing questions about how we best live together, we've opted for a model of selfishness.

It really interests me how any future humans will look back on the current era, how its mass delusions and failures of co-operation will be re-written into victories – should we survive. Feeling sad or shameful about the past is seen as weak, navel-gazing, and I wanted to write a story where feeling sad and shameful became the only feasible way to move forward, the one

thing that brought some kind of hope. The whole story kicks off because someone - in the immortal words of *The Wire* (2002-2008) - gives a fuck when it's not her turn to give a fuck.

EP: And finally: to what, if any extent, do you think our stories can change our relationship to the nonhuman – and can you name some of your standout examples?

TA: Oooh yeah. They completely can, always have. In some ways our very oldest stories, the pre-agrarian ones, are about the living rocks and the sentience of the landscape itself, humans as an integral part of their environment... rather than as some kind of chosen children of the cosmos, shaping it, destined for greatness.

And what I love about sci-fi as a genre is that these oldest stories have been transposed and re-embodied into technological beings like HAL 9000 and R2-D2 and the TARDIS... the rocks and trees are now robots and computer programs, all of them still somehow imbued with an essence equalling more than the sum of their parts, holding the possibility of mystery and magic. I find a big weird hope in that kind of thing – in humans creating myths about the inner lives of non-human things. We adore stories about random objects that aspire to the condition of humanity because, deep down, we suspect that's our own story.



Photo credits: Tanuja Amarasuriya / Sleepdogs